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Some Americans don't believe all people are created equal. Their movement is going mainstream, this author says

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created equal.

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Look around you, they say. Most Americans **are** takers, not makers. Rich people **work** harder. Poor people make bad choices. Some racial groups are born with **more intelligence** than others. That may sound harsh to some, but remember, they say, "**empathy is a weakness.**"

These observations come from some of the

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These anti-egalitarians “fiercely, angrily, and passionately” preach variations of the same argument: that extreme inequality is not only inevitable in America but is also good for the country, says Kim Phillips-Fein. Her book, [“Country of Lords: Neo-Aristocrats, Social Darwinists, Tech Utopians, and the Long Fight Against Equality in America,”](#) traces this line of thinking back to some of the country’s Founding Fathers.

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Phillips-Fein cites such prominent people as Elon

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Monday
 30° - 40°
 Clear, sunny
 High 40° at 1:00 PM
 Low 30° at 6:00 PM
 Wind: 10-15 mph
 Humidity: 60-70%

Monday
 35° - 45°
 Partly cloudy
 High 45° at 1:00 PM
 Low 35° at 6:00 PM
 Wind: 10-15 mph
 Humidity: 60-70%

Monday
 40° - 50°
 Partly cloudy
 High 50° at 1:00 PM
 Low 40° at 6:00 PM
 Wind: 10-15 mph
 Humidity: 60-70%

Monday
 45° - 55°
 Partly cloudy
 High 55° at 1:00 PM
 Low 45° at 6:00 PM
 Wind: 10-15 mph
 Humidity: 60-70%

Monday
 50° - 60°
 Partly cloudy
 High 60° at 1:00 PM
 Low 50° at 6:00 PM
 Wind: 10-15 mph
 Humidity: 60-70%

Wednesday
 30° - 40°
 Clear, sunny
 High 40° at 1:00 PM
 Low 30° at 6:00 PM
 Wind: 10-15 mph
 Humidity: 60-70%

Wednesday
 35° - 45°
 Partly cloudy
 High 45° at 1:00 PM
 Low 35° at 6:00 PM
 Wind: 10-15 mph
 Humidity: 60-70%

Wednesday
 40° - 50°
 Partly cloudy
 High 50° at 1:00 PM
 Low 40° at 6:00 PM
 Wind: 10-15 mph
 Humidity: 60-70%

Wednesday
 45° - 55°
 Partly cloudy
 High 55° at 1:00 PM
 Low 45° at 6:00 PM
 Wind: 10-15 mph
 Humidity: 60-70%

Wednesday
 50° - 60°
 Partly cloudy
 High 60° at 1:00 PM
 Low 50° at 6:00 PM
 Wind: 10-15 mph
 Humidity: 60-70%

Friday
 30° - 40°
 Clear, sunny
 High 40° at 1:00 PM
 Low 30° at 6:00 PM
 Wind: 10-15 mph
 Humidity: 60-70%

Friday
 35° - 45°
 Partly cloudy
 High 45° at 1:00 PM
 Low 35° at 6:00 PM
 Wind: 10-15 mph
 Humidity: 60-70%

Friday
 40° - 50°
 Partly cloudy
 High 50° at 1:00 PM
 Low 40° at 6:00 PM
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Friday
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"Openly anti-egalitarian ideas are flourishing — the claim that monarchy might be preferable to democracy; that autocratic societies in which power is tightly controlled from above are preferable to open ones; that rich people are smarter, more capable, and more talented than those without money; and that society should simply accept the concentration of intergenerational wealth," Phillips-Fein writes in "Country of Lords."

These ideas also are flourishing because of recent economic conditions in the US, says Phillips-Fein, a Pulitzer Prize [finalist](#) for a book she wrote about New York City's fiscal crisis in the 1970s and the rise of austerity politics.

Income and wealth inequality in America are

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As the nation celebrates its [250th anniversary](#), it's easy to forget what drove many Americans of the Revolutionary era: a hatred of hierarchy and inequality. They envisioned a "country without lords, kings or a hereditary aristocracy," Phillips-Fein writes.

Phillips-Fein recently talked to CNN about how those ideals have eroded in recent years and why some working--class and poor people embrace the belief that extreme inequality is good for America. She also discussed how the [growing popularity](#) of democratic socialist candidates in the US may represent a return to egalitarian ideas.

Her comments were edited for brevity and clarity.

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[illegible]

What inspired you to write this book?

I was trying to answer the question of why conservatism is so deeply rooted in American history. Why is it that these ideas so often appeal? One way to think about this was to look at the long history of these ideas, and not just at a moment like the 2016 election, or of Ronald Reagan in the 1970s and 80s.

The book is trying to grapple with how extraordinarily unequal the American economy and society has become today. Why is that? And how is it that people accept this incredibly high level of economic inequality that ... makes it increasingly hard for democracy to function?

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tradition has enabled this level of inequality. What is that tradition?

If you look back through the sweep of American history, there's one overt tradition that celebrates the idea of equality and democracy. You hear people giving lip service to this and talking about the schoolbook version of what American history is about. But alongside it, and in dialogue with it, is a shadow that's closely connected to another set of ideas, which says, actually people are not equal.

Those ideas say some people are superior to others, and the inequality that exists in the world around us reflects those innate differences, and inequality is a good thing, and a necessary thing, and the only real way to organize social life.

It's striking how many times you hear people explicitly countering the language of the Declaration of Independence. (She cites Ford,

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moving into the mainstream?

Yes. You see it ... in significant parts of the Republican party, in Silicon Valley and in the upper echelons of the tech world.

It's never been something that's only on the margins. Many of the people that I write about in the book were wealthy and prominent in their day. The book discusses Andrew [Carnegie](#), one of the wealthiest people of the late 19th and early 20th century. He writes extensively in defense of inequality. There's also [William Graham Sumner](#), who taught at Yale. Even [John Adams](#) (America's second president) was deeply uncomfortable with some of the more egalitarian claims of the Revolutionary era.

One of the dangers of a very unequal society is that it will provide fertile ground for ideological and philosophical defenses of that inequality. That is what we're seeing today.

Can you give recent

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ELON MUSK'S COMMENTARY (MUSK [SAID](#) IN A 2023 interview that "the fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy").

Think about Vice President JD Vance, who said (in [a 2025 speech](#)) that America is not a creedal nation. (Vance also [said](#) that America is not just based on an idea but "a particular people" and "a particular set of beliefs.")

You say there are leaders who argue inequality is not only natural, but essential for society to function. Can you point to an example?

[Milton Friedman](#) (the late Nobel Prize winning economist) talks specifically about Muhammad Ali and (legendary actress) [Marlene Dietrich](#) as examples. Both had something special that nobody else had, and they became fabulously

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rich and poor people buy into this shadow tradition?

The people making many of these arguments have evident wealth and social privilege. It often seems if you're not part of that inner group ... (but) you put forward these ideas or embrace them, you might be able to win favor. You might be able to find your way into the inside group.

This constellation of ideas can be taken up by people outside of the very wealthy and adapted to give people a sense of privilege over those they think are more subordinate to them. They can partake in this worldview and get some kind of psychic satisfaction out of it.

In a world in which people actually experience that there are winners and losers, you have two choices. You can either say what we need really is a different way, a society that is less hierarchical. But if that seems impossible to

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what it doesn't mean

everybody's interchangeable.

What equality means is that all people have a deep innate intelligence, worth and moral sensibility. And that a just society is one ... in which people's equal potential for flourishing and happiness is able to find expression. It really is not a question of sameness. It is a recognition of difference, but one that recognizes the inherent worth of other people.

Recent elections have shown the growing popularity of democratic socialists. Could this trend reflect a yearning for a return to a more egalitarian America?

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affordability and the difficulties of working-class people. That is certainly a part of it. But it goes much further. There is also a sense of real revulsion and anger about the concentration of wealth at the top, and a sense of wanting to create a more egalitarian country ... that speaks to a sense of fundamental human dignity.

How can this tradition of egalitarianism be revived in America?

I don't think there's just one answer, but I would point toward two things. I do think that real democratic — small D — political participation goes a long way towards starting to redress these extreme inequalities. Becoming more politically engaged oneself ... along with other people, makes concrete the ideas about equality and democracy, and can give people a sense of hope for the future.

And studying history is tremendously helpful. It doesn't solve anything in the short run, but

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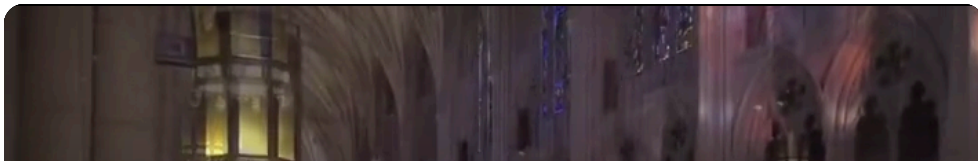


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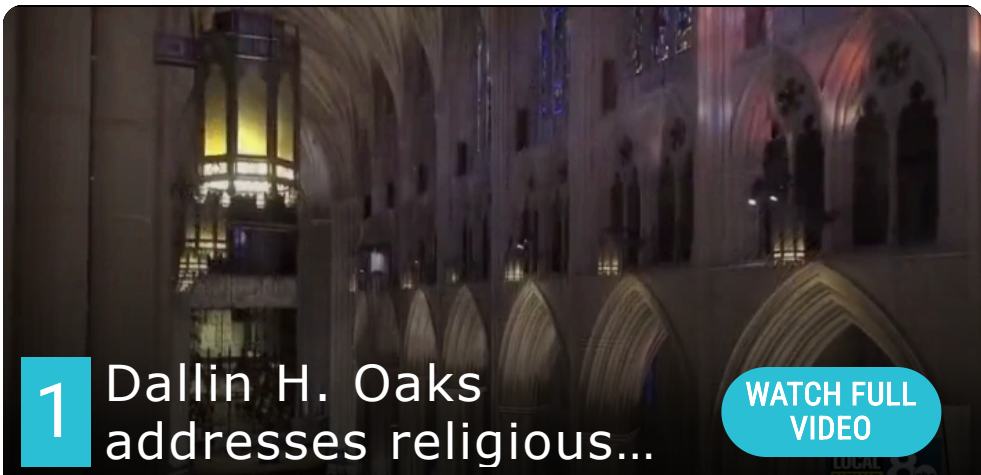
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