THANK GOD IT'S MONDAY

KATE ARONOFF

There are still jobs where folks punch the clock, put in their forty hours a week, stick with one employer for decades, and maintain a clear divide between work and the rest of life, but they are increasingly rare. "Put in your time" has been replaced by "innovate," "leverage," "network," "disrupt," and "hustle." If the upside is unprecedented opportunities for interesting careers and financial success, the downside includes high stress, little job security, no pension, and soul-crushing work weeks of sixty, seventy, or sometimes a hundred hours. In this article Kate Aronoff takes a critical look at WeWork, a "co-working" company that's redefining work environments and erasing lines between work and life. Aronoff is a writing fellow at In These Times and, according to her Twitter profile, an Aspiring Mistress of Economics; her work on climate change and politics has appeared in such publications as the Intercept, the Nation, the Guardian, and Dissent, the source of this selection.

THE ORIGIN STORY OF WEWORK, the co-working company, might be as big a part of its image as the office space it rents out. Its co-founder and CEO Adam Neumann was raised on a kibbutz,[186] an Israeli cooperative built in the mold of the early twentieth-century socialist Zionists who sought a "conquest of labor”[187] (kibbush avodah) in establishing a homeland for Jews in Palestine. Speaking at a tech conference in New York in 2015, Neumann reflected fondly on his childhood, going to school, eating dinner, and doing homework with the same kids each day. But there was a flaw.

“In a kibbutz everyone makes the same amount of money,” Neumann lamented. “I always remember thinking that it’s not fair that someone’s effort is not being rewarded based on what he puts in.” In starting WeWork, Neumann — a tall thirty-six-year-old, usually sporting a blazer thrown over a WeWork T-shirt — set out to correct the imbalance. He calls his company “a capitalistic kibbutz: On the one hand, community. On the other hand, you eat what you kill.”

Since opening up shop in 2010, Neumann has certainly been eating well. In the wake of the housing crisis, he and his co-founder, Miguel McKelvey, have built WeWork into a company worth tens of billions by following a simple business model: buy large chunks of space in huge metropolitan office buildings, deck them out with desks, walls, and kegs, and then sublet to freelancers, mid-sized companies, and start-up founders at a premium on month-to-month contracts. Don’t sell space, though; sell community, in the form of single-origin coffee and craft beer, a company-wide social networking app, and an office environment that plays as hard as it works. WeWork doesn’t have tenants. It has “members,” of WeWork and of the WeGeneration.

The average WeWork member — a millennial, to be sure — is an almost Platonic ideal of what the journalist Paul Mason describes in his book Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future as "the T-shirted techno-bourgeoisie . . . their information stored in the Cloud and their ultra-liberal attitudes to sexuality, ecology and philanthropy." They represent a "new normal" of office life and life in general: where work and play are increasingly indistinguishable, and both hinge on access to vast networks and limitless streams of information.

5 WeWork's network-first approach to work is reflected in its cosmopolitan, creative-class aesthetic. Locations around the world are virtually identical, from San Francisco to the Negev:[188] they all feature the same oak floors, clean lines, and hand-worn metal and wood furniture. Walls throughout the building are plastered with multi-colored, productivity-themed aphorisms like "Hustle" and "Thank God It's Monday."

Reverence for hard work is not simply a decorative gimmick, but core to the WeWork philosophy. The imperative to hustle reflects the way the founders see (and wish to shape) the future of work. Meanwhile, WeWork's popularity is driven — in part — by the increasing atomization of labor[189], across income brackets. By offering workers an alternative to days spent alone behind a computer, Neumann and McKelvey discovered they could turn a profit by exploiting one of the defining features of work's so-called future: isolation.

Sharing Looks a Lot Like Paying Rent

Despite the fact that WeWork has been around for years and is currently valued at $16 billion, the company is still commonly referred to as a “start-up,” a misidentification the founders are keen to perpetuate. To hear Neumann tell it, WeWork is disrupting work itself, revolutionizing the economy by applying a sharing economy ethos to drab office life. “We are a community of creators,” he told Bloomberg[190] when asked about the company in May 2015. “We create an environment for entrepreneurs and freelancers and we leverage technology to connect people. . . . It’s a new way of working. Just like Uber is the sharing economy for cars . . . we’re the sharing economy for space.”

But sharing, in WeWork’s vision, looks a lot like paying rent. Joining the WeGeneration doesn’t come cheap. A $45 “We Membership” buys access to WeWork’s online community and the ability to work at a location anywhere in the world for two days a month. Dedicated desks in Manhattan range anywhere from $450 to $800, with single occupancy private offices stretching up to $2,100 per month. By square footage, space tends to be more expensive than that in the surrounding neighborhood. Aside from the beer and office services (one year of Amazon Web Services credits, discounted payment processing, lunch delivery, and so on), the price point is said to derive from all the immaterial benefits of being surrounded by young, driven professionals who “do what they love” — a slogan stamped on the coffee cups that line each floor. In April 2016

WeWork opened its flagship WeLive location on Wall Street, offering fully furnished, dorm-like accommodations complete with extracurriculars like yoga, "family dinners," and building-wide karaoke. Another WeLive, in the D.C. suburb of Arlington, Virginia, opened shortly thereafter. Members — at work, home, and play — can now lead their whole lives within the WeWork bubble, so long as they can cough up a few grand a month.

Company founders have repeatedly denied that their brainchild is in the real-estate business — in large part through clever branding. Senior staff hold titles like "Head of Community," and Neumann seldom makes it through an interview or press event without rattling off stories about his childhood in Israel, first years in New York, failed early business ventures, or relationship with his muse-turned-wife. Such tales, too, are why investors and consumers both treat WeWork more like a unicorn[191] than a multinational corporation.

10 If there is sharing happening, it's between WeWork and major developers. According to WeWork Real Estate Head Mark Lapidus, the company has built close relationships over the years with real-estate giants like Rudin Management and Boston Properties to negotiate favorable leasing terms. Lapidus calls their landlords "partners," and notes that "60 percent of our deals probably come through either landlords with existing relationships, where we have other locations, or landlord referrals, or just landlords reaching out to us and saying, 'Hey,

before I put this on the market. . . .'"

Do What You Love — Or Else

What happens inside the walls of WeWork is as old-fashioned as the process through which the company acquires its space. Referring to employees as family members has a long tradition in the corporate world as a means to rebuff organizing drives and calls for higher wages. In the case of WeWork, talking points about community and family have come in handy when deflecting the many labor complaints it has fielded over the last several years.

Building trade unions placed an inflatable Scabby the Rat[192] outside of WeWork's Wall Street location last year, to protest the company's decision to work with notoriously anti-union builder Gilbane on their new development on the Brooklyn waterfront. In 2015, after contracted WeWork cleaning staff in New York tried to unionize with SEIU 32BJ,[193] WeWork president and COO Arthur Minson sent members and other employees a company-wide email:

> To be clear, employees always have a right to unionize. However, we don't think having a union at WeWork makes sense. Similar to the way many of you run your businesses, we take great pride in the fact that every WeWork employee is part of the WeWork family. Having an independent voice representing a portion of our employees goes against our fundamental belief that all of the WeWork employees should be treated the same, and all jobs at

WeWork are equally valued.

The cleaners, paid just $10 an hour, were employed by Commercial Building Maintenance Corporation (CBM). After the unionization drive WeWork cancelled its contract with the company. With the union's help, workers led a campaign called "We Work Here Too," demanding that fired cleaners be brought back as WeWork staff at higher wages. In replacing the workers, WeWork "invited" janitorial staff to apply for their old jobs, though many of the now-unionized staff didn't receive calls back. The company eventually settled after months of protests, agreeing to hire some workers as staff at wages between $15 to $18 an hour, and to give priority to fired CBM employees. WeWork now uses a mix of in-house and contracted cleaners. Contracted cleaning staff in New York and Boston are now members of SEIU 32BJ, according to a spokesperson for the union, and talks are ongoing to establish collective bargaining agreements at locations in other cities.

Ironically, as of 2015, cleaners were the only WeWork employees mandated to wear shirts that said "Do What You Love." For Community Managers — the company's frontline staff, responsible for changing kegs and keeping WeWork locations running — the shirts are optional. As are — some employees allege — breaks for meals, overtime pay, and (until recently) their legally guaranteed right to unionize.

15 WeWork's page on Glassdoor, a Yelp-like ratings site for

employees to anonymously rate their employers, offers a window into what it's like to work there. Community Managers are typically college grads making upwards of $40,000 a year. Reading their reviews, a few trends surface: a near-total collapse of work-life balance, marathon working days, unclear job descriptions, a cult-like enforcement of the company's mission, and a senior management that's as demanding and raucous as it is disorganized. Of his time at WeWork, one reviewer wrote that he "would rather rub salt on [an] open wound than work here again."

According to former Associate Community Manager Tara Zoumer, negative reviews aren't just angry exceptions. She worked at the company from March until November 2015 for a $42,000 per annum salary. Zoumer reported that she and other employees regularly worked fifty- and sixty-hour weeks without overtime, with some weeks pushing a hundred hours on end. "You're not getting a single dollar extra for any of that time but you're made to be responsible, and punished if you aren't keeping pace," she told me. "You're given a goofy title and fed three shots, but you can't pay your rent with that."

In her training, she recalled that one of the first mantras she and her colleagues were fed was, "Work hard, hustle harder, everyone does everything." Staff were required to give out their personal cell phone numbers to members, without receiving either company phones or reimbursement.

"They blurred the work-life balance to such a point where WeWork really does become your life," Zoumer said. Rebekah Paltrow Neumann — WeWork founding partner, Chief Brand Officer, and Adam Neumann's wife — went a step farther in an interview with Fast Company. "We don't have a line at all between work and life. It's not even a blurred line. There is no line."

When Zoumer started voicing her concerns to management and fellow coworkers, she was called into a meeting with her supervisor and one of WeWork's West Coast managers. They told her to back off, and she was asked if she wanted to resign. In another meeting, Zoumer alleges, one manager chalked the company's flexible relationship to labor standards up to its status as a start-up.

20 Compliance was still a long way off, but WeWork made moves shortly thereafter to protect itself from employee complaints. Several weeks after Zoumer's meeting, all the employees at her location were called into a conference room, one by one, and asked to sign a nondisclosure agreement and enroll in an Employee Dispute Resolution Program (EDRP) — or, as Zoumer calls it, "a really cute name for a program that completely strips you of your rights." EDRPs are contracts that prevent workers and consumers from joining class-action lawsuits and taking other forms of legal action against their employers, directing them instead toward out-of-court arbitration processes paid for by the company.

As a New York Times investigation into arbitration found, the tool — traditionally wielded by major corporations — is increasingly being used by tech companies and start-ups. Drivers in ride-sharing apps like Lyft and Uber, for instance (each of which have offices in WeWork locations), have long existed in a legal grey area between contractors and full-time employees, allowing companies to pick and choose the protections they extend to their employees; an arbitration agreement prevents workers from banding together to take Uber to court.

With one suit already filed against WeWork, Zoumer told her manager she would need a few days to look over the EDRP paperwork, which was dozens of pages long. She sent an email to 150 of her coworkers with links to the Times investigation, and informed them of their right to a trial by jury. The next Monday, Zoumer found her email account suddenly disabled. Minutes later she was called into another meeting with her supervisor, told she was being fired for refusing to sign the documents, and escorted out of the building.

Zoumer currently has two ongoing claims against WeWork. One is over what she alleges was a misclassification of her employment status, which will enter into arbitration this spring thanks to a stipulation in the contract she signed when she was hired. The second is a complaint filed by the NLRB in response to Zoumer's claims, in which it alleges that WeWork unlawfully restricted the concerted activities of its employees, and that it specifically retaliated against Zoumer for her efforts to organize with her colleagues. That case could end up in front of the Supreme Court, setting a precedent not just for how WeWork treats employees but for how workers should be treated in the sharing economy as a whole.

From Scrip to Start-ups

Meanwhile, the WeWork founders like to encourage a lax attitude to the distinctions between life and livelihood for their members as well as their workers. On top of its dealings in real estate, WeWork is a full-fledged lifestyle brand. Neumann hopes the company will one day swell to include a “WeStreet” and “WeNeighborhood” — reminiscent of Uber’s ambition to “evolve the way the world moves,” on every front from mass transit to logistics. At WeWork’s core is a utopian vision, based on having life itself revolve around a passion for what pays the bills.

25 A high rise in New York City’s Financial District is the home of the first WeLive, a “coliving” complex that opened in early 2016. Inside, it looks and feels like a college dorm — albeit an expensive one. The company’s two ventures are stylistically seamless, bringing the shabby-chic minimalism of WeWork to the shared kitchens and lounges, or “neighborhoods” (sets of residential floors), of WeLive. Many WeLive residents commute to other WeWork offices around New York, rather than descend several floors to the one at 110 Wall Street. But it isn’t only twenty-something WeWorkers yearning for dorm life that move

into WeLive. The oldest tenants are a couple in their mid-sixties, my tour guide at WeLive (a Community Manager and WeLive resident herself, who preferred to remain anonymous) told me. The couple, she said, had wanted to downsize from their apartment on the Upper East Side and house in Westchester. There are also young families and divorcees punctuating the building's majority-millennial population. "It's a great place for people who are in a period of transition in their life," my tour guide explained.

Long before WeLive, co-living helped provide the start-up capital for America's own transition into industrial capitalism. Most infamous in this vein were the Lowell Mill Girls, teenagers shipped off from the countryside to make textiles in Northern Massachusetts during the early nineteenth century. Loosely inspired by Robert Owen's utopian socialist experiment in New Lanark, Scotland, company towns like Lowell were intended, on one hand, to shelter the poor from the "Satanic Mills" of early industrial capitalism, providing decent food, shelter, and a paid day's work. On another, less altruistic hand, company towns were a means for cost cutting and control. Having workers centralized, living yards away from their bosses, was an obvious boon to productivity. That they had their basic needs already met was a justification for lower wages, since employees wouldn't have to shop for homes and meat on the open market.

Just as important for employers was constructing a world for their workers that was dependent at every level on the company's success. If profits were down, after all, there might be less food in the company store. In places like Appalachia, coal camps — maybe the most brutal example of the company-town model — were the only industry for miles around. Company stores, by extension, were the only stores for buying necessities like grains and cloth. Whole families could be raised on the company scrip[194] and goods doled out by coal bosses. And as waged work became the norm in America, both the productive and reproductive labor necessary to eke out profit could be housed in the same compound. If proximity to work eased the transition from feudalism, several of the early company towns in the United States began to resemble fiefdoms. Considering that the company-town model predominated in capital-intensive extractive industries (coal and lumber, especially), it quite literally fueled the United States' rise as an industrial superpower.

By design, the bosses' interests fused with those of their workers, who didn't have an ideological motivation for a fatter bottom line so much as a material one to put food on the table and wood in the stove. Community, in a company town, meant everyone: from foreman to chimney sweep, with some benevolent industrialist sitting atop a familial hierarchy. As unions entered the coal camps, in battles like Matewan[195] and the one for Blair Mountain,[196] it wasn't only the coal barons beating them back. In addition to private agencies like the Pinkertons, companies regularly used locals to suppress organizing efforts. In Butte, Montana, for instance, the sheriff's office deputized mine guards — employees of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company — to break a 1920 strike, sparking the bloody conflict that became known as the Anaconda Road Massacre.

As the company-town model started to fade, though, automation brought with it Fordism[197] and a wage theoretically big enough to pay for both a car and a middle-class life — backed at least partially by a moderately functional social safety net.

30 WeWork invites us to imagine another kind of transition. Neumann may not be creating a new regime of labor for the twenty-first century so much as capitalizing on one already in the works. Programmers at companies like Google and Facebook are well accustomed to having employers meet their every need, such as meals from five-star chefs and fully equipped gyms in exchange for ten- and twelve-hour workdays. One of the labor movement's hallmark victories — an eight-hour workday — is now being eroded on each end of the economic spectrum: by start-up wunderkinder[198] toiling late into the night as well as by low-wage service workers juggling multiple jobs just to make rent, one of which might happen to be as an Uber driver. Where one might walk away with millions in venture-capital funding, another could be making less than $7 an hour, as Uber drivers did during the Republican National Convention. Though it's not happening on a large scale yet, it's not inconceivable to imagine an expanded version of the WeLive

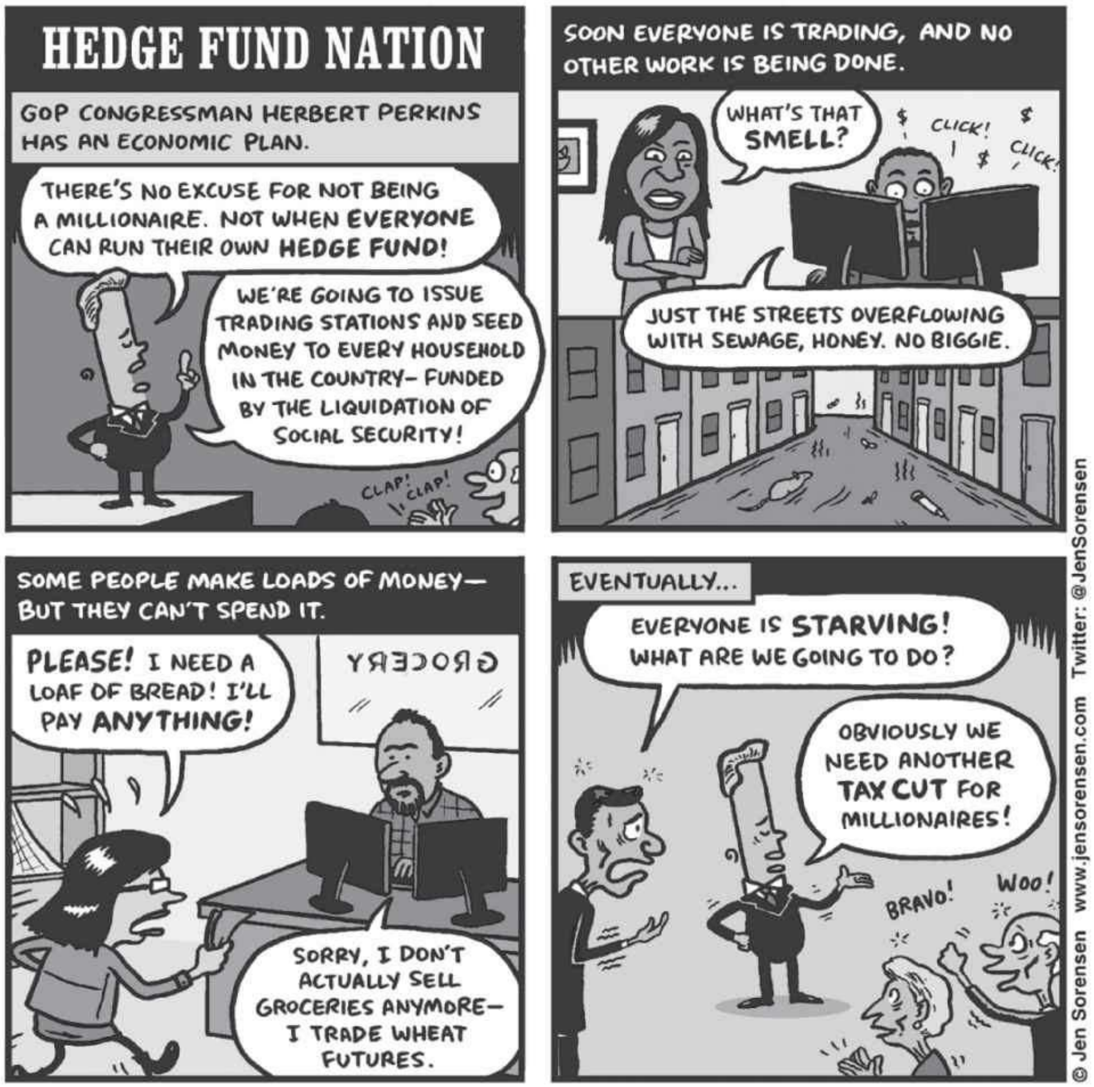
accommodations used to house the company's cleaners and Community Managers as well as the employees of members who run their own start-ups and small businesses, crafting a totalizing "WeLife" for members and employees alike.

WeWork, WeLive, We Fight

WeWork's embrace of the idea of boundless workdays ignores the psychic toll they can take, though it grasps their appeal. Life under capitalism is getting increasingly lonely, anxious, and depressing — especially for the millennials who form the core of WeWork's customer base. (A study from 2014 found that eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds were four times as likely to be lonely as people over seventy.) We humans are social creatures, too, and our endless, solitary workdays might — literally — be killing us, raising the risk of early death by 26 percent. A physiological study of social animals — dogs, monkeys, and other species — found that our non-human brethren are more likely to choose physical pain than isolation. As George Monbiot has pointed out, too, the poor are far more likely to suffer from loneliness. Living with the stigma of poverty and eviction can be just as deadly. Following the housing crisis, suicide rates in austerity-pummeled Spain[199] shot up by 20 percent. In the first two years of Greece implementing its austerity programs, that country's suicide rate climbed by a full 35 percent.

Unlike livable wages, the isolation of neoliberalism in the twenty-first century cuts across class — though its burden is shared unequally. So while WeWork's business runs, in part, off old-fashioned labor exploitation, it also serves a need that's become more pressing in an economy defined by both inequality and alienation: community, but only for those who can afford a few thousand dollars a month.

In the left's quest to beat back inequality, bread-and-butter demands — for things like a $15 minimum wage and paid family leave — sometimes neglect the emotional pain of suffering under capitalism. Reaching beyond more individualized concepts of "selfcare," what would it look like for movements to foreground a vision of a better society free not just from fossil fuels and poverty wages, but also from loneliness?



Jen Sorensen

ENGAGING THE TEXT

1. Aronoff reports that WeWork members include "freelancers, mid-sized companies, and start-up founders" (para. 3). Why might WeWork be a good fit for these clients, and what kinds of businesses do you think would be a poor fit for a "capitalist kibbutz" environment?

2. Explain the ways in which WeWork is selling community, not

space. Which of these are most and least attractive to you, and why? To extend the assignment, write a brief account of one worker's day in a WeWork office, portraying it either as an ideal environment or as an intolerable dystopia. Share stories with classmates and discuss what they tell you about WeWork and about your own ideas about jobs and careers.

3. Unpack Paul Mason's description of millennial workers in paragraph 4. What does "techno-bourgeoisie" mean, for example, and what "ultra-liberal" attitudes about sexuality, ecology, and philanthropy might Mason have in mind? To what extent do you agree with this description of millennials, and how well does it apply to your own generation?

4. Rebekah Paltrow Neumann says "we don't have a line at all between life and work" at WeWork (para. 18). What are your own aspirations in terms of life/work balance? What percentage of your time and energy would you happily devote to work, and what are your realistic expectations? What goals, if any, would motivate you to work sixty or seventy hours a week?

5. If you have any experience living in a dorm or other communal environment, what sense of community or joint purpose did it provide? Could you be happy living in a very nice dorm or WeLive building for a decade or more? Why or why not?

6. **Thinking Rhetorically** In discussing WeWork's confrontations with unions, Aronoff reminds us of mill towns and coal mining companies — two infamous examples of the systematic exploitation of workers. Is it reasonable — or rhetorically effective — to imply comparisons between WeWork and armed

conflicts that historians call “battles” and “massacres”? What can you infer about Aronoff’s politics from her accounts of labor disputes?

EXPLORING CONNECTIONS

7. Read “The Gender Knot” by Allan Johnson (p. 527), paying special attention to the section on “male identification” (pp. 531–534). What aspects of WeWork might lead Johnson to consider it a “male-identified model” of work, and to what extent does WeWork also promote qualities that he labels stereotypically feminine?

8. Whether she is writing about mill towns, the mining industry, or WeWork, Aronoff highlights problems such as the exploitation of workers, job insecurity, and cutthroat competition. Compare her perspective to the Utopian vision in Rutger Bregman’s “Why We Should Give Free Money to Everyone” (p. 456). Whose vision do you think will prove more accurate over the next twenty years, and why?

9. Read or review Kevin Drum’s “You Will Lose Your Job to a Robot — And Sooner Than You Think” (p. 322) for another vision of the future of work. Discuss how the prospects of automation and artificial intelligence might impact the WeWork model. If you have a career goal in mind, how would you assess the likelihood of these risks — losing work/life balance, having your job outsourced to another country, and being replaced by a robot or AI program?

EXTENDING THE CRITICAL CONTEXT

10. Research how WeWork has fared since 2017, the year this essay was published. Has the company expanded into new cities? Has its value increased or declined? Has the company gone public with an initial public offering of stock (IPO) — a move that many analysts predicted for 2018? What is the status of Tara Zoumer's lawsuit, and how has WeWork handled the "many labor complaints" (para. 11) that Aronoff mentions? Taking into account what you learn about these issues, discuss whether you expect WeWork's "capitalistic kibbutz" model to be successful in the long term.