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Radical Politics Facing the 'Emancipation Paradox'

Albena Azmanova
City, University of London, albena.azmanova@city.ac.uk

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A critical-realist look at contemporary capitalism: goodbye to wishful thinking

We stand at a peculiar historical junction. The neoliberal form of capitalism – the combination between free and open markets that has been the dominant formula of the political economy for the past four decades[1] – has come under pressure, as it has been blamed for skyrocketing inequalities, financial instability, deepened exploitation, and environmental degradation. This is creating the opening for an emancipatory transformation. However, three facilitating factors for radical change are missing – a systemic crisis, the likelihood of a revolutionary upheaval, and a motivating utopia.[2]

First, there is no systemic crisis of capitalism, apart from the periodic crises that are endemic to it – capitalism is surely not on its death bed, as the economic dynamic of profit-creation is doing fine.[3] Rather than a terminal crisis of capitalism, we find ourselves in a condition of societal meta-crisis: the crisis has entered a crisis of its own, it has looped itself into

[1] The neoliberal policy doctrine that permeated the political mainstream of western societies in the late 1970s combined laissez-faire in domestic economic policy (i.e., via privatization of public assets and de-regulation of product- and labour markets) with opening of domestic markets to global economic competition via free trade as the foreign economic policy component of the shift. Notwithstanding diverse national variations in its implementation, this doctrine has provided the impetus for tearing down the post-war welfare state and the construction of globally integrated capitalism, operating on the principle of free markets.

[2] These reflections draw on my book *Capitalism on Edge: How Fighting Precarity Can Achieve Radical Change Without Crisis or Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020). See also Azmanova (2022) and Allen et al. (2023).

[3] For a discussion of opposing views on the 'terminal crisis of capitalism' see Janzen (2022). I subscribe to the position that cyclical crises are part of the restorative dynamic of capitalism. For a good exposition of this view, see Agnoletto (2013).

a perpetual stasis -- a condition of chronic inflammation, in which society perceives itself in crisis, yet lacks the energy for a transformative mobilisation (Azmanova 2020a, 2020b).

Second, there is no viable utopia to show the way out. Despite some resurging popularity among young people, the socialist and communist utopias have lost much of their appeal, having been disgraced by the dictatorships that had adopted them as their ruling doctrines. That is why, even if they remain intellectually viable, they are no longer politically productive – that is, they no longer possess the requisite ability to generate significant political mobilisation to effect tangible change.

Third, the prospects for a revolution in the sense of mass insurgency are scanty; no sudden and deliberate upheaval of the social system seems to be in the offing.

Given that those three facilitating factors for radical transformation are missing – game-changing crisis, revolutionary break, and utopia – how do we maintain the prospects of social transformation that is radical and emancipatory?

My suggestion is to undertake an immanent critique of contemporary capitalism by bringing into focus the 'critical realist'[4] nature of such a stance.

[4] I refer here to critical realism as a perspective of analysis, an analytical stance that was first articulated by Roy Bhaskar (1978, 1989) as a position within philosophy of science that combines philosophical pragmatism with a commitment to discerning the underlying generative mechanisms behind social phenomena. In my interpretation here, it also calls for eliminating normative considerations when crafting *diagnoses* of social conditions but not in addressing paths of social transformation. Kant, for instance, adopted such a stance in discussing the enabling conditions of lasting peace: he advised against assumptions about actors' moral virtues in analyses of political phenomena (Kant, 1795). In other words, critical realism sharpens the capacity for emancipatory critique by eliminating wishful thinking in the commitment to non-domination as a normative orientation. In my understanding, this is the philosophical disposition we find in Marx's critique of capitalism;

I refer here to critical realism as an analytical stance that was first articulated by Roy Bhaskar (1978, 1989) as a position within philosophy of science that combines philosophical pragmatism[5] with a commitment to discerning the underlying generative mechanisms behind social phenomena. In my interpretation here, the critical realist perspective calls for eliminating normative considerations when crafting diagnoses of social conditions (the realm of analysis) but not when designing paths of social transformation (the realm of advocacy). That is, ethical values can be empirically studied, but they have no place among the core assumptions guiding our diagnostic and prognostic efforts. Kant, for instance, adopted such a stance in discussing the enabling conditions of lasting peace: he advised against assumptions about actors' moral virtues in analyses of political phenomena (Kant, 1795). Thus, critical realism sharpens the capacity for emancipatory critique by eliminating wishful thinking in the commitment to non-domination as a normative orientation. In my understanding, this is the philosophical disposition underlying Marx's critique of capitalism; it is also implied in first generation Frankfurt School authors' commitment to eliminating oppression rather than crafting and implementing utopias.

A critical realist stance on immanent critique, then, would acknowledge the deficient empirical enabling conditions for achieving normatively desirable goals. In turn, I shall understand the goals of emancipatory action in the minimal sense of the 'practice of critical politics',

it is also implied in first generation Frankfurt School authors' commitment to eliminating oppression rather than implementing a utopia.

[5] I have in mind here philosophical pragmatism's understanding that knowing the world is inseparable from agency within it – that is, knowledge is sourced from practices, it is not a reflection of the world independent from those practices; this does not mean that reality does not exist independently of our awareness and knowledge of it. (See entry "Pragmatism' in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: //plato.stanford.edu/entries/pragmatism/).

that is, practice oriented by a commitment to reducing oppression (countering domination) rather than by aspirations for progressing towards a normatively defined goal.[6]

Upholding a critical-realist position when performing an immanent critique of contemporary capitalism eliminates the normative judgment in discussing capitalist crisis, anti-capitalist revolution and post-capitalist utopias as social phenomena. In other words, I am not advocating that we shun away from crisis, a revolutionary break, or the reliance on utopia, based on a judgment of their desirability – my normative stance here regarding crisis, revolution and utopia is irrelevant to the analysis I undertake. Thus, admitting that these facilitating factors for radical change are effectively missing at this particular historical junction will help us shake off the wishful thinking that tends to mar much analyses on the left. Such a position, I believe, is already implied in critical social theory's commitment to immanent critique, but foregrounding it might help us stay the course.[7]

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[6] I owe the term 'practice of critical politics' to my student and collaborator Raphael Wolff..

[7] It is this failure to uphold the critical-realist character of immanent critique that led Habermas to perform a soft transcendentalist turn in critical theory in the 1970s, when he recentred the critical enterprise around the (felicitous) concept of communicative rationality and later, of 'discourse ethics'. As he sought to discern secure grounds of normative judgment by reflecting on the communicative preconditions of cognition, Habermas proposed to found a universal ethics on the principle of dialogue, propelling the notion of 'a rational conception of justice' into a vantage point of critique. The idea was that properly structured communication— freed from the distortions incurred by power, money, and ideology— can lead us to a rationally demonstrable universal interest. This move diverted the critical enterprise away from a diagnostic critique of capitalism and reshaped it into normatively-laden democratic theory that is poorly equipped to tackle the socio-structural drivers of oppression. See Azmanova 2012, Ch3.

Discerning the prospects of radical emancipatory transformation would require, above all, a careful diagnosis of the form of capitalism we now inhabit with a view of identifying the enabling conditions for the desired change. These enabling conditions I understand in a two-fold sense. On the one hand, they concern the purposefulness, and hence, the direction of transformation. If contestations of the social order originate in grievances of harm, grievances that motivate social struggles and effect social change, then we need to inquire about the mobilizational power of these grievances. What injustices become problematized as being politically relevant and ergo – object of mobilisation? On the other hand, enabling conditions concern the emergence of agency -- certain circumstances enable or impede the consolidation of social angst into politically productive action, that is, action able to produce a novel socio-political reality.

Diagnosing capitalism

Remaining within a Marxian social ontology of capitalism as a system of social relations, let us now look at contemporary capitalism's performance within three realms: (1) distributive outcomes; (2) the structuring institutions[8] that undergird power asymmetries (i.e. the private property and management of productive capital), and (3) capitalism's constitutive dynamic – i.e. the pursuit of profit. The following story emerges:

Distributive outcomes

[8] I prefer to speak of 'structuring institutions' or 'institutions with structuring effect', rather than 'structures', in order to avoid the reification of 'structure'. The division of society into two classes (capital owners and labourers) is based on the institution of the private property of the means of production. The class structure is an outcome of the operation of that particular institution.

Extreme poverty and extreme wealth have risen both globally and within western countries since the turn of the century, and discrimination on race, sex, and other noneconomic characteristics is pervasive. This is generating relational domination (the power that actors have *in relation* to each other) within ever steeper pyramids of stratification. Fighting inequality and exclusion has been the main creed of social criticism and protest politics over the past two decades. However, such mobilizations are often haunted by what I have discussed as 'the paradox of emancipation': they tend to enhance the value of the social system within which inequality and exclusion are being sought, thus unwittingly increasing the legitimacy of an unjust system (Azmanova, 2016, 2019, 2020).

Structural dynamics

Here the main institutions of capitalism – the private ownership and control of productive assets and the 'free' labour contract, relentlessly keep generating the harm of exploitation. This is politically enhanced through the politics of austerity which is consolidating the class relation even as it hurts the capitalist class in the short term (Mattei, 2022).

However, a new feature of capitalism comes into view. Even as the private property and management of the means of production remains a key institution of capitalism – an institution through which the profit motive is enacted, its social effect and ergo, its political significance, has diminished. This is the case because class no longer as strongly determines social status as it did in the 19th century when Marx performed his analysis. The political economy of contemporary capitalism is different. In the early 21st century, capitalism relies less for its reproduction on the institution of the private ownership of productive capital. Forms of property ownership and professional tenure have proliferated; through pension funds invested in

stock markets, employees become nominally capital owners, even if they have zero decisional power over the operation of their capital. On the other hand, a variety of institutions, including state-owned companies and even states, are engaged in the pursuit of profit – a case in point is China.

The globalisation of capitalism is altering the nature, the social relevance and the political effect of the 'class divide'. For instance, both workers and employers in industries reaping the benefits of the digital economies of scale profit from exposure to global markets. Employees in these industries (e.g. in IT, banking), even outside management positions, constitute socially privileged groups. On the other hand, owners of many businesses in the old industrial economy are seeing their businesses suffer in a context in which the global competition for profit is almost exclusively based on price. Unsurprisingly, such small business owners were among the Yellow Vest protesters in France, sharing with workers a grievance about rising cost of living.

It seems to me that the revolutionary subject can no longer be pre-packaged according to class structure (the neat indicators of property status). The institution of the private property and management of the means of production is still there, but it does not have a strong socio-structuring effect -- other factors play a stronger role (type of skill, education, ethnicity) in determining social status. This is why the political significance of class is waning. In other words, class distinctions are no longer politically productive.

In the context of globally integrated capitalism, projects that rely on 'the class struggle' encounter the paradox of emancipation in the following way: non-capitalist (collective, public) forms of property ownership in fact fuel the profit motive. Let us take as an example the idea, now fashionable

on the left, of worker-owned enterprises or of empowering workers by giving them a seat on company boards. . This solution is fully in line with the classical socialist strategy of countering exploitation by eliminating the institution of the private ownership and management of the means of production. In the context of a planetary rush for profits within global markets, such an emancipatory strategy would only increase workers' personal investment in the pursuit of profit, with all the nefarious consequences of that (e.g. self-exploitation and environmental destruction). The inadvertent outcome of such a strategy is full subjugation to the profit motive, not emancipation from it. As Marx would put it, this will "transform the relationship of the present-day worker to his labour into the relationship of all men to labour", as a result, "society would then be conceived as an abstract capitalist" (Marx, 1844).

Systemic dynamics

What do we notice on the plain of the systemic dynamics of capitalism -- the pursuit of profit? In the context of digitalized economy and planetary-wide market integration, the pursuit of competitiveness[9] in the global economy has become a top policy priority which has reshaped the political economy of capitalist democracies, especially by means of deregulation of labour markets and cuts to social spending.

In my diagnosis, this has generated two fundamental antinomies within the political economy of contemporary capitalism. The first is that of 'surplus employability', which refers to the contradiction between the rising

[9] Competitiveness in the global economy, which became an explicit policy priority at about the 20th's century's end, often mandates the suppression of competition (the main tenet of liberal capitalism) for select social actors so as to boost the advantages they already have in the global marketplace.

potential for de-commodified social life that automation enables, and the intensification of commodification pressures – we are all increasingly dependent on holding a paying job. This syndrome entrenches paid employment more than ever as the premier social value, even as the digital revolution creates unprecedented opportunities for generating social wealth with far less time spent in market-value-adding activities. This in turn relates to the second antinomy, which is that of 'acute job dependency': the economy produces fewer and fewer good jobs, yet people's reliance on paid employment keeps rising as wages continue stagnating and relentless austerity brings social supports to ever-more abysmal levels (Azmanova 2020: 147-151).

Largely due to these two antinomies, the competitive pressures of capitalism are now spread so broadly in society that they affect people across social class, professional skills, levels of education, and even irrespectively of income and wealth. The result is a condition of precarity which is not just concentrated among society's lowest-wage and most disposable workers but rather infuses the labour economy as a whole. This epidemic of precarity I have discussed as a condition of politically generated economic and social vulnerability caused by insecurity of livelihoods – a form of disempowerment that is typically experienced as incapacity to cope. This sense of failing to cope is itself rooted in *a misalignment between responsibility and power*, as public authority increasingly offloads responsibilities on individuals and societies – responsibilities they are unable to manage.[10] Precarity, thus understood, harms people's material

[10] Levels of stress and burnout in the workplace have been on the rise globally for more than a decade and are now at record high, according to Gallup's annual report covering 116 countries (Gallup, 2023).

and psychological welfare – indeed, even that of the purported 'winners', and hampers society's capacity to manage adversity and to govern itself, as we saw during the Covid Pandemic (Azmanova 2023).

In this sense, generalised precarity is the social question of our times – it is a transversal social injustice cutting across all other forms of social harm. That is why, I contend, a formidable alliance could be forged for the first time against the wellspring of capitalism – the profit motive which is the root cause of ubiquitous precarity. Be it inadvertently, such a mobilisation could subvert capitalism (rather than overthrow it) and eventually supplement it with a new socioeconomic form. Do we need to name, to label, this post-capitalist form? I do not think so. Radical critique's job is to discern available opportunities for radical transformation; the direction of change towards a more just society will emerge incrementally from fighting the systemic roots of social harm.

The agency conundrum

However, even as generalised precarity creates an opportunity for a very wide anti-capitalist alliance of forces to emerge, precarity itself is a factor undermining transformative agency. Precarity triggers a quest for safety, and thus – it nurtures either aversion to change (conservative dispositions) or a longing for autocratic shortcuts to stability (reactionary dispositions) (Apostolidis 2022; Azmanova 2004, 2011, 2020a). Precarity erodes previously existing solidarities among social classes, as everyone is now out to save their own neck. Within electoral democracies, the educated middle and upper-middle classes have traditionally been champions for the poor, who are less politically active. Such solidarities engendered the consensus behind the redistributive policies of the post-war welfare state. Currently, the affluent are abandoning the poor, and the working classes

are once again turning against immigrants for fear of job loss. Ultimately, precarity is politically debilitating: those afflicted by it have neither time norenergy for civic engagement.

And so, we are confronted with the conundrum of agency in our times: the intensified and generalised profit motive creates mass precarity; but rather than a massive rebellion, the thirst for security nurtures conservative attitudes, thereby stabilising the very system that generates precarity. The challenge is to break this vicious circle, as we cannot wish it away by calling for a revolution. The revolutionary subjects are missing, and this time it is not because they are co-opted by capitalism and seduced into the lull of vulgar consumption (in the various versions of the 'false consciousness' thesis). Rather, the potential revolutionary subjects are scared, entirely motivated by fear and blaming themselves for their incapacity to cope.

Here the paradox of emancipation finds its completion: Precarity (generated by the profit motive running amok) disempowers people, depriving them of agency even as it generates a broadly shared interest in overcoming capitalism. It follows that we need to empower them by decreasing precarity via the familiar policies of economic democracy (e.g., job protection and wealth distribution). However, such policies also alleviate the experienced harm that fosters anti-systemic attitudes. Breaking this deadlock is the greatest challenge radical transformative politics is facing today.

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