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## Fantasies of Empowerment and Realities of Entrapment: Critique Amidst Ubiquitous Precarity

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## Fantasies of Empowerment and Realities of Entrapment: Critique Amidst Ubiquitous Precarity

Albena Azmanova

### Pandemonium: Two Historical Trajectories and an Anxious Stasis

Modernity, indelibly marked by uncertainty and turmoil, has entered a state that has invited the label ‘pandemonium’ – a word that suggests a pathological, threatening, unwelcome disorder. Amidst this maddening chaos, we ask: What kind of analysis can underpin a praxis of critical politics in the thick of this disorienting, and, hence, disempowering, uproar? How can critique be of practical use for the purpose of emancipatory re-ordering?

I will venture an answer that begins with singling out features I consider to be distinctive of ‘pandemonium’ as a state of contemporary modernity. But I would like to dampen somewhat the hubris of embarking on such a magnanimous endeavour by avowing, and endorsing, the limitations of my vantage point. My reflections proceed from where I happen to be – the historical locus of liberal democracies in the Global North, a space that, for me, stretches from my native Bulgaria to the United States where I was educated, through Belgium and the UK where I live and work. Even as I claim no validity for my diagnosis beyond this constrained socio-geographic space, it is likely to have global implications, which I will address in due course.

The societies of the Global North, self-described as ‘liberal democracies’, now appear to be at the tipping point of a tectonic policy shift – and to be stuck at that tipping point. In the historical juncture we now inhabit, two trajectories compete to prevail.

Along the first trajectory, these societies are at the height of their material affluence, scientific brilliance and institutional sophistication. We have the knowledge, resources and capacity to address grave challenges of ecological emergency, poverty and disease. Bold and elaborate policy plans exist such as the European Green Deal, which is indeed comprehensive and deeply transformative. There is vision, as well as capacity. Soon, artificial intelligence will help us get rid of mundane tasks that are draining our creative energies. The future looks bright, and, together, we can counter the adversities of the present.

There is a rival trajectory, however: admirable long-term and global policy commitments are neglected or compromised for the sake of ever-

proliferating emergencies. Climate disaster is upon us, but worries about energy security and cost of living anxieties override climate concerns. Our politics, despite their grand ambitions and commitments, are afflicted by both tunnel vision and myopia, as they are increasingly focused on the here-and-now. We are trapped in the tyranny of a present scarred by rising poverty, inequality, insecurity, discrimination and autocratic rule; violations of the rule of law are rampant even in the mature democracies of Europe.<sup>1</sup>

The competition between these two trajectories has engendered a stasis: even as there is an overwhelming understanding of the urgent need for change, the desired change is not taking place, despite the apparent political will and available material resources to secure the victory of the first trajectory. Like a feverish person suffering from a chronic illness, our societies are, thus, in a state of perpetual inflammation: they yearn to heal themselves, to break the stasis, but do not seem to have the energy to do so.

### Two Obstacles for Transformative Politics

Apart from the condition of anxious stasis, two further features of the ‘pandemonium’ (as the contemporary state of modernity) inhibit transformative politics. The first is the spreading of precarity – politically generated and ubiquitous insecurity. The second is the lack of a positive, forward-looking utopia to guide social discontent into an emancipatory action. Let me briefly address these two features.

Insecurity, instability, and uncertainty are hallmarks of modern life – features that have become even more acute in the times of ‘liquid modernity’<sup>2</sup> that marry globally integrated capitalism with the IT revolution. Undeniably, human life is fragile, human beings vulnerable and fallible, and their societies are regularly beset by conflict even as they experiment with ever more sophisticated methods of social co-ordination. That is why ‘entropy’ is a more fundamental concept and a better guide to life processes than notions that have dominated social science, such as energy or order, as James Galbraith has suggested.<sup>3</sup> With that in mind, we can set out to discern those forms of insecurity that are pernicious (and, hence, constitute a pandemonium as a condition adverse to individual and societal well-being), from those that are liberating or simply unavoidable.

Since the onset of the neoliberal reordering in the late 1970s, a peculiar form of fragility has afflicted our societies, which has been discussed as ‘precarity’ – a condition of disempowerment rooted in social threats to lives, livelihoods and lifeworlds.<sup>4</sup> In my account, precarity is marked by three features. First, it is *politically generated* and, hence, not a ‘normal’ or unavoidable feature of modernity. Its contemporary form has been crafted through the policies of privatization of public assets, deregulation of product- and labour-markets, and slashing of public spending – the inglorious policy trio of neo-liberalism. This has engendered an acute insecurity of livelihoods. The key

political technique of active precarity-production consists in misaligning responsibility and power through individual responsabilisation: public authority increasingly offloads responsibility to individuals and society, without giving them the resources to cope. An example is the tendency of the European Union to ask governments to increase social protection while cutting spending. Second, precarity has become *ubiquitous*, as it spreads across differences in social class, education, employment and income. Even those with well-paid and supposedly stable jobs fear for their livelihoods and struggle with mounting work pressures and the imperative to remain not only employed but employable. Third, on personal level precarity is experienced as incapacity to cope, while at societal level it hampers society's capacity to manage adversity and govern itself.<sup>5</sup> Thus, ubiquitous precarity has become one of the main engines of the 'pandemonium' we inhabit.

Another key catalyst of emancipatory change is also missing: that of a forward-looking utopia. Notwithstanding the rising popularity of left-radicalism among the young, the communist utopia has been so discredited by the failed experiments in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and elsewhere, that it has lost its capacity to mobilise considerable political energies. Moreover, the lines of social conflict have multiplied and are currently forming a complex network of antagonisms (financial capital versus industrial capital; the rich versus the poor), and often groups of victims fight one another: the Western working class against the working classes in developing countries, the over-worked labour-market insiders versus the perpetual jobseekers. This *networked antagonism* blocks the emergence of a revolutionary subject with a coherent ideology (utopia) around which a counter-hegemony could emerge.<sup>6</sup> Instead, what thrives in the context of precarity are the conservative/reactionary utopias of an imagined, purist past that have been propelling far-right parties to power across Europe.<sup>7</sup>

The combination of massive precarity and the lack of positive utopia is politically lethal. Precarity undermines solidarities as many fear the imminent loss of their livelihoods and social status. Precarity is politically debilitating as it leaves no time and energy to engage in big thinking about the kind of societies we want to build. It fosters a thirst for security, for short-cuts to stability, which aspiring dictators are happy to provide. (I defined precarity as responsibility-without-power; its corollary is power-without-responsibility, that is, autocracy.) This is why the social anxieties precarity unleashes fuel the reactionary utopias through which the increasingly desperate people are trying to tame the chaos of the pandemonium.

### Whither Emancipatory Critique?

Can we forge a path forward without the crutches of utopia? And how can critique help? In the condition of pandemonium marked by disempowering and disorienting precarity, we need a peculiar style of theorising that is neither in the service of political expediency nor is hampered by wishful

thinking. A strand of critique within the Frankfurt School tradition, at least since Theodor Adorno's formulation of 'immanent critique' as opposed to 'transcendent critique', has been committed to a nonideal, negativistic conception of emancipation from oppression, one aspiring to diminish suffering rather than to obtain the just society. Amy Allen has aptly named this approach 'emancipation without utopia'.<sup>8</sup> The question of emancipation without utopia requires thinking without dogma in the spirit of what I would describe, borrowing from Ian Shapiro, as 'strategically hopeful pragmatism'.<sup>9</sup> The analytical pragmatism as a stance of critique I suggest here consists in the gesture of daring to examine, and possibly discard, key categories of emancipatory critique and social criticism if they are no longer politically productive. In other words, we need to bid farewell to fantasies of empowerment that inadvertently build realities of entrapment. Three such truisms are hegemonic within Left-leaning critique, and we need to beware of them, resist and reject them.

### *Beware of 'Crisis'*

'Crisis' towers over conceptual edifices describing the current conundrum: the narrative of crisis has been with us now for twenty-five years – the crisis of capitalism, of democracy, of the European Union, of the global liberal order. 'Polycrisis' is the current champion: the cumulation of multiple crises. The 'crisis of capitalism' has been one of the particularly unfortunate ideas that the intellectual class has produced in the early twenty-first century. On the Left, it took the shape of the expectation of capitalism's imminent collapse triggered by rampant inequality, greedy bankers and reckless rulers. On the political Right, this idea took the shape of a temporary, but dangerous malfunctioning of a mechanism that is allegedly essential for the well-being of societies, because our livelihoods depend on it – something that had to be saved by giving even more power to economic and political elites. This fear of systemic collapse then justified the policy cure of austerity, for instance, cutting public spending to appease financial markets.

The 'crisis of capitalism' diagnosis is faulty. Capitalism is not on its deathbed; even as society is ailing, capitalism as a social system animated by the profit motive is doing just fine. We should not be counting on a 'crisis of capitalism' to engage in transformative politics. But the 'crisis of capitalism' narrative has done much harm. Because policy-making has been dominated by the discourse of crisis, the policy process has taken the form of crisis-management. But crisis-management automatically retracts the horizon of thinking, it pulls it towards the present, and we are thus forever entrapped in the tyranny of the present. Our policies become reactive crisis-management undertakings that, while providing emergency fixes to the ailing system, have unwittingly perpetuated the crisis, because the root causes have been institutionalised into a new normal. To find pandemonium's exit, political imagination must exit the crisis-management mode and turn to the future by focusing on attainable – here and now – opportunities for a sustainable wellbeing.

### *Beware of Calls for 'More Democracy'*

Democratization is currently the highest and broadest banner of progressive politics – it stands for inclusive empowerment of us as free individuals and thriving societies. 'Power to the people' is an honourable fight to fight, indeed. Yet, we must ask: how come the discourse of democratization is so fashionable among political elites? Could it be that this is yet another neo-liberal strategy for dumping responsibility onto society while all effective power is retained at the top? If we do democratization the wrong way, we are likely to end up with a situation where we, as individuals and societies, have all the responsibility without the power, while public authority and other influential actors have all the power and none of the responsibility. (Recall that responsibility-without-power is the DNA of precarity, which paves the way to power-without-responsibility, i.e. autocracy.) In such a situation, the political discourse of 'more democracy' becomes a tool of oppression; it engenders autocratic forms of disciplining the anxious pandemonium.

This danger has become particularly acute in our times. The traditional channels of electoral democracy give voice to the anxieties and the reactionary attitudes that precarity fosters. This is the case because, in the voting booth, we are alone. This is how democracy becomes part of the problem it is trying to solve.

How can we avoid this particular entrapment? The answer is: pressure public authority to assume its responsibilities; demand transparency and accountability;<sup>10</sup> endorse innovative forms of democratic participation that foster cooperation and collaboration. Also, whenever the powerful of the day give us more responsibilities, we should make sure also to demand the means – the funds, the time, the institutions, the know-how – to carry those responsibilities. Only then will democratization not be an entrapment that combines responsibility for the many with power for the few. Such an alignment between responsibility and power will strike at the very roots of the pandemonium as a condition of ubiquitous precarity.

### *Beware of Concerns with Inequality*

The indignation against inequalities of income and wealth charts the common sense of the social justice agenda. It is well established that reducing inequality has cascading benefits, from improved health to lower crime rates and better educational outcomes.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, the issue of inequality cannot be equated with that of poverty. As the philosopher Harry Frankfurt points out, the poor suffer because they do not have enough, not because others have more.<sup>12</sup> We can have perfectly egalitarian societies that are very poor and precarious – a pandemonium of equals. And even more alarmingly: there is something deeply neoliberal in our fixation on inequality. To think in terms of inequality is to engage in a logic of comparison between individuals, to present the idea of social justice in individualistic terms – as a matter



of personal circumstances, of private wealth. Such a focus on individual circumstances is a hallmark of the neoliberal mindset. A focus on inequality draws attention away from concerns with collective well-being that have always been fundamental to the socialist project.

We need to ask ourselves, why are we so worried about inequality? How come inequality has become socially and politically significant? There are two plausible answers. One answer is that economic inequality entails social and political inequality. But in this case, we need to fight the institutions that translate money into influence, such as campaign financing in electoral politics and legacy preference in university enrolment. The second answer is: ubiquitous precarity. We become so sensitive about inequality because in conditions of depleted public resources and insecure livelihoods, personal income is the only safety net we have – otherwise most people are neither aware how much others have nor care about it.<sup>13</sup> But to count on personal resources is an illusion: for instance, no one can be rich enough to secure for themselves good healthcare; this requires huge investment in education, research and health-care provision. Instead, we need to fight precarity by building up the commons – a solid social protection system, not just a weak ‘safety net’. Tax the rich – yes, but not simply to equalise private resources, but to strengthen the commons. In other words, the answers are not in the sphere of redistribution that does nothing to diminish the insecurity that pervades our lives, but in the sphere of pre-distribution – stable jobs, solid public services and a robust public sector of the economy managed with strict accountability.

The point, of course, is to reorder the pandemonium without transforming the chaos into oppressive, rigid certainty. For total security can be as disempowering as radical instability. Finding the path from debilitating stasis to creative uncertainty would require the courage to jettison some of the hegemonic cornerstones of ‘progressive politics’, namely: crisis as a catalyst of emancipatory change, increasing democratic input as a means of solving the ‘crisis of democracy’, and aspiring for economic equality as a formula of social justice. For while it is futile to attempt to reduce modern life’s complexity, we can at least make sure we do not navigate that complexity with outdated nautical maps.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account of rule of law violations in Spain, France and Bulgaria, see Albena Azmanova and Bethany Howard, *Binding the Guardian: On the European Commission’s Failure to Safeguard the Rule of Law* (European Parliament, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000)

<sup>3</sup> See James Galbraith and Jing Chen, *Entropy Economics: The Living Basis of Value*

*and Production* (The University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2025); and James Galbraith, ‘Entropy, the Theory of Value and the Future of Humanity’, in *Post-Neoliberalism, Pathways for Transformative Economics and Politics*, online symposium curated by Albena Azmanova and Pavlina Tcherneva (OSUN Economic Democracy Initiative) 2 February 2024 <<https://www.postneoliberalism.org/articles/entropy-the-theory-of-value-and-the-future-of-humanity/>> [accessed 21 May 2024].

<sup>4</sup> For a review of the literature on precarity see Jaime Aznar Erasun, 'Scrutinizing Precarity: In Search of Emancipatory Potential', *Emancipations: A Journal of Critical Social Analysis*, 1.3 (2022).

<sup>5</sup> See my *Capitalism on Edge: How Fighting Precarity Can Achieve Radical Change Without Crisis or Utopia* (Columbia University Press, 2020); 'Six ways to Misunderstand Precarity: Reflections on Social Angst and Its Political Offspring', *Emancipations: A Journal of Critical Social Analysis*, 1.3 (2022); and 'Precarity for All', in *Post-Neoliberalism: Pathways for Transformative Economics and Politics*, online symposium curated by Albena Azmanova and Pavlina Tcherneva (OSUN Economic Democracy Initiative), 29 November 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Albena Azmanova, *Capitalism on Edge*, p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> In 'The Inverted Post-National Constellation: Identitarian Populism in Context', *European Law Journal*, 25.5 (2019), pp. 494–501, Azar Dakwar and I observe that the contemporary far-right populism defies the habitual matrix within which right-wing radicalism is seen as a complete negation of liberal trans-nationalism. Thus, the pan-European 'Identitarian movement' amalgamates features of cultural liberalism and racist xenophobia into a defence of 'European way of life'.

<sup>8</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (Continuum, 1973); Amy Allen, 'Emancipation Without Utopia: Subjection, Modernity, and the Normative

Claims of Feminist Critical Theory', *Hypatia*, 30.3 (2015), pp. 513–29; Albena Azmanova, *The Scandal of Reason: A Critical Theory of Political Judgment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Ian Shapiro, *Uncommon Sense* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2024). He defines 'strategically hopeful action' as 'a certain kind of calculated risk-taking in the face of imponderably complex circumstances, the aim of which is to replace a destructive status quo with a new and better dispensation' (p. 22).

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Kalypso Nicolaidis's proposal for a 'democratic panopticon' that ensures decisional elites feel perpetually watched by the people ('The Democratic Panopticon', *Noema*, 6 July 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level* (Allen Lane: 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Inequality* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> See Ian Shapiro, 'Insecurity, Not Inequality', in *Post-Neoliberalism: Pathways for Transformative Economics and Politics*, online symposium curated by Albena Azmanova and Pavlina Tcherneva (OSUN Economic Democracy Initiative), 19 November 2023; Albena Azmanova, 'Precarity, not inequality is what ails the 99%', *Financial Times*, 27 April 2020 <<https://www.ft.com/content/0a566844-83e7-11ea-b6e9-a94cfd1d9bf>> [accessed 21 May 2024].

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