5 1989's ambitious pragmatism

Lessons for fighting autocratic capitalism today

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Sleepwalking into dissidence

In the spring of 1988, I was 20 years old, a first-year student of political science at Sofia University. A professor mentioned that signatures were being collected for a petition asking the government to take action against the dreadful pollution of a Bulgarian city on the Danube River by a factory located on the Romanian bank. Having been raised a good communist, I dutifully walked to the indicated location and added my name to the petition, content that I was acting as a good citizen and comrade. On the very next morning, the Dean of my department called me in his office and said: "Albena, you have signed up to a committee that does not have the blessing of the Party. We will have to therefore expel you from the university. Unless, of course, you withdraw your signature." This is how, inadvertently, unwittingly, I became a dissident. By force of the ban, our simple plea to protect human life and nature – perfectly in line with the humanism of the communist doctrine – acquired the meaning of opposition to the dictatorship. The struggle for ecological justice and for human rights became a struggle against a regime that was irresponsive to human needs, while drawing its legitimacy from a doctrine espousing solidarity and a commitment to a shared wellbeing. The petition I signed helped launch the movement Ecoglasnost, the progenitor of the Green Party. I neither withdrew my signature nor was I expelled from the university – fully within the bizarre logic of those liminal times when overt oppression was no longer deemed necessary by a regime grown oblivious of its acute fragility.[1]

The revolutions of 1989 have descended into the rearview of history. Our great emancipatory project expired before it became historically exhausted. Our revolutions were pregnant with an idea, a precious insight about radical social transformation, that is urgently needed today – and which I will address in what follows. I will first offer some reflections on the peculiarity of the current historical junction to elucidate the impetus for change it contains. I will then reflect on the nature of critique that is needed to address the current emergencies and then try to recover some of the lost wisdom of 1989 – wisdom whose time has come again. In conceptualizing the insight from the success

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and failures of the transitions from autocracy in East and Central Europe and the lessons they carry for current-day European societies, I will draw closely on the writings of Václav Havel, as his were the interpretations of contemporary history that most closely reflected the practice of the anti-totalitarian insurgencies and inspired our thinking at the time.

Awakening into precarity capitalism

Let us begin from where we happen to be now – the historical juncture at which Europe stands almost four decades after 1989. We are on the verge of an epochal shift. On the one hand, the neoliberal social order is decomposing, first under the blows of the financial crisis of 2008, followed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis that ensued. The neoliberal formula of free markets, globally integrated economies, cultural and political liberalism,[2] and internationalism is not entirely debunked, but the consensus that supported it, that gave it a sense of inevitability and durability, is no longer there. The space is opening for an alternative sociopolitical form. Moreover, it is becoming widely acknowledged that an effective reaction to the ecological disaster will require an unprecedented mobilization of resources as we need to produce and consume differently, and we must make that shift as a matter of emergency. So, by all evidence, we are in a moment that combines a sense of acute urgency and the active search for alternative sociopolitical scenarios. However, even as the understanding is there that such a radical shift is needed and the moment for it is right now, neither the political will nor the intellectual energies are there for a radical transformative change.

Under pressures from the political right, neoliberalism is morphing into a variety of capitalist autocracies. On the left, the popularity of two competing alternatives to neoliberalism is growing, namely, the social-democratic vision of inclusive prosperity as it was enacted by the post-war welfare state and the more radical vision of socialism. These alternatives are trite, failed forms which are a dead end in view of the exigencies of our time. To take the welfare state: its celebrated formula of inclusive affluence was achieved at the price of intensified production and consumption, which incurred a terrible trauma on the environment. This is no way to go if we mean to contain the ecological crisis. The currently popular, more radical alternative – socialism, is lacking the generative power to uproot and replace neoliberal capitalism. On the one hand, the experiments with socialism that the Soviet-type dictatorships undertook deprived the idea of its appeal. On the other hand, as the example of China has displayed, the collective ownership of the means of production (as the key structural feature of socialism) does not prevent a company or a state to behave like a capitalist actor in the global economy – that is, to pursue profit with all the nefarious impact this has on individuals, their communities, and their natural environments. Thus, models that are currently celebrated as being radically progressive – such as Thomas Piketty's "participatory

socialism"[3] – do not have the emancipatory power we currently need. We are stuck, as the acute need for radical transformation is not matched by novel projects and novel political energies.

Rather than a radical social transformation beyond neoliberal capitalism, we are witnessing the waning of liberal democracy – a phenomenon driven by the simultaneous metamorphosis of the political economy and the governing systems of capitalist democracies, which I will address next. The rise of autocratic rule – more apparent in the East, more insidious in the West – is a trans-European pathology. It has spread in countries headed by Eurosceptic leaders as well as European loyalists, in old member states (Spain, France, Austria) and in new ones (Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania).[4] Much of the assault on the rule-of-law nowadays happens through the mechanisms of representative democracy – via laws enacted, or supported, by democratic majorities. Thus, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán who won three land-sliding victories at national elections, passed a new Constitution after coming to power, and amended it seven times – each time with a supermajority. These reforms, executed with the mechanisms of democratic law-making, have increased the power of the state and reinforced the governing conservative Fidesz party's position in public institutions while curtailing civil liberties – a classic case of rule of law "backsliding." In response to international and domestic criticism of the reforms, Gergely Gulyás, the deputy leader of the Fidesz parliamentary group responded, "It's natural for the governing majority to make use of the authority it received in democratic elections" (quoted in BBC, 2013) thereby supplying a fresh illustration of James Madison's forewarning, some 200 years earlier, that democratic legitimacy tends to fuel what he called the "elective despotism of parliaments": "One hundred and seventy-three despots would surely be as oppressive as one," he wrote (Madison, 1961, p. 311).

The phenomenon of "illiberal democracy"[5] has become a trademark of the early 21st century. Its engine has been the anti-establishment discontent that has beset Western societies over the past three decades – discontent expressed most distinctly by antiestablishment parties and movements that are typically labelled "populist." Often the perpetrators of the autocratic turn are persons and parties that had been beacons of the struggle for freedom. Fidesz is the most striking case in point, as it has relentlessly mutated from a left-liberal movement that led the rebellion against the totalitarian regime in Hungary in 1988–1990, to a far-right party with an unabashed penchant for autocracy. The assault on the liberal norms of pluralism and toleration is often done in the name of the protection of the liberal model of life, as far-right xenophobia is directed against Muslim culture, purportedly guilty of militant traditionalism. It is liberal democracies' new illiberal and anti-democratic political appetites, their endogenous impetus towards dictatorships, that is the most striking feature of contemporary European societies – aligned with a similar development in the United States.

These dynamics within the governing systems of European societies have to do with peculiarities of their political economies. The erosion of liberal rule

in Europe might have been enabled by the far-right populist mobilizations, as far-right parties propel to power autocratic leaders through the mechanisms of representative government. However, the rise of populism itself is an offspring of another phenomenon: precarity – politically crafted social and economic insecurity (Azmanova, 2004, 2020). The political economy of precarity has been engineered over the past four decades through a constellation of sociopolitical changes, which included the collapse of the regimes that labeled themselves "communist" in East and Central Europe and the absorption of these societies into the European Union (EU).

Towards the end of the 20th century, the global political economy was redesigned to allow for maximum economic efficiency via breaking down barriers to trade – a process in which the EU played a leading role.[6] Increased competition for profits in the globally integrated capitalist economy prompted governments to abandon societies to market forces, thus completing the transition from the post-war welfare state to neoliberal capitalism, marked by the hegemony of economic logic and its penetration into all spheres of governance. A dramatic illustration of the ultimate consolidation of neoliberalism was the failed attempt by the European Commission to pursue the idea it had in 2017 to develop a vaccine for pathogens like coronavirus within the Innovative Medicines Initiative – a public-private partnership between the EU and the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations, whose purported function is to fund health research and innovation. The drug companies rejected the idea as being unprofitable and the project was dropped (Boffey, 2020). While it is unsurprising that an economic actor like a pharmaceutical company should be driven by considerations of profit, the European Commission, as the executive arm of the EU, is a public authority with the duty to safeguard public welfare. It adopted market logic to the detriment of the public good.

At about the turn of the century, capitalism acquired new characteristics. One such shift concerned the key policy priority. Competitiveness, rather than competition, became the top priority in terms of economic policy. Thus, the Lisbon Agenda of the EU, adopted in 2000, pledged to make the European economy the most competitive economic area in the world by 2020. To achieve national competitiveness in the global economy, governments not only deregulated labour markets and production processes, and privatized public assets (something they did under neoliberal capitalism), but they began actively to support the most powerful economic players, going against one of the core tenets of capitalism: competition. This consisted in active state intervention to maximize the advantages big corporations already had in the global economy: that is, states used the distributive techniques they had developed under the post-war welfare state but affected the distribution in the opposite direction – from the weak actors to the strong ones – in the name of ensuring national competitiveness in the global market. At the same time, digitalization and automation eliminated many jobs and allowed some to relocate to places

with cheaper labour. As a result of this, competitive pressures increased on everyone but a handful of big companies. This has engendered massive precarity – politically generated economic insecurity and social vulnerability that harms people's material and psychological welfare, as well as society's capacity to cope with adversity and govern itself.[7]

The ensuing precarity has spared no one – rich and poor, young and old, skilled and unskilled have all been affected. Precarity breeds anxiety and fosters public demands for security and safety. To this, political elites across the left-right divide have responded by increasing their stronghold on society through law-and-order policies rather than providing the economic safety for which people yearn. Autocracy is the most natural corollary to economic precarity. Precarity and autocracy reinforce each other: economic insecurity breeds autocratic attitudes that propel dictators to power, whose assaults on the rule of law further disempower citizens, leaving them to the mercy of despots.

To understand the full implications of this vicious circle formed by economic insecurity and political autocracy, it is worth recalling the etymological roots of the word "precarity." It has its origin in the Latin "precarius," which means obtained by entreaty (by begging or praying), given as a favour, depending on the pleasure or mercy of others (from prex – "to ask, entreat"). The core feature of precarity is powerlessness, it literally means "depending on the will of another." Thus, the antidote to precarity is neither economic stability nor strong central authority – both can be disempowering. An open society, in contrast to a totalitarian society, does not eradicate uncertainty; the keyword in the fight against precarity is not security, but empowerment: an open society is enabled by a social system that empowers its members to pursue their visions of the good life without fear. In this exactly, liberal democracies are failing: our political economy has been designed in such a way as to generate precarity, which undermines liberalism by nurturing a longing for safety and security. Struggles against precarity need to be therefore forged as strategies for empowerment, not for stability.

What are these strategies, and which are the forces able to formulate and carry them out? Most importantly, who are victims of precarity, and can they be agents of change? The term "precarity" for a while was reserved to describe the lot of the worst off – the British sociologist Guy Standing (2011) coined the term "precariat" (akin to the "proletariat") to describe workers on temporary and poorly paid jobs. American philosopher Judith Butler (2004) also conditions precarity on inequality and exclusion. In my work, however, I speak about the massification of precarity as the great social evil of our times: the illness has spread, affecting almost everyone, irrespective of skills and income levels. Precarity is what currently ails the 99 percent. Because of competitive pressures for fewer and fewer good jobs, our livelihoods have become insecure; at the same time, we cannot rely on quality public services or the capacity of even affluent states to act effectively in the public interest – the Covid-19 pandemic made that painfully clear.

The events of 1989 exacerbated precarity on both sides of the iron curtain: the post-communist societies demolished the robust social safety nets people had been used to; many of these societies fell in the hands of an oligarchic mafia; in a word, people suddenly found themselves within a new sociopolitical context they did not know how to navigate and were poorly equipped to handle. For Western Europe, the Eastern enlargement of the EU brought globalization abruptly into Europe, deepening already existing social anxieties related to labour market liberalization (Azmanova, 2009). During the 2005 referendums on the Constitutional Treaty for Europe, both the French Left and the Right used the imagery of the "Polish plumber" who was allegedly threatening to take the manual jobs from workers in the old member states, to campaign successfully for a negative vote. As fear of job outsourcing has become shared across the working and middle classes, negative attitudes towards the Eastern enlargement increased. Thus, EU-wide deliberative poll in 2007 established that, when issues of social policy and EU enlargement were discussed together, negative attitudes towards enlargement significantly increased (Deliberative Democracy Lab, 2007; Azmanova, 2011).

The political fallout from precarity is dramatic, as it destroys the conditions for radical, emancipatory politics. Insecurity makes people conservative; it breeds reactionary instincts, as people long for security and embrace political short-cuts to safety – from opposing immigration to supporting autocratic leaders. Since the 1990s, as a result of growing insecurity, the agenda of political debate throughout Europe has changed in terms both of public sensitivities and official political discourse. Partisan disagreement has moved beyond the left-right divide over economic policies along the poles of free enterprise on the right and redistribution on the left. Campaigns started to center on political and economic insecurity. A new order-and-safety (or anti-precarity) agenda has emerged, with four constitutive elements: physical security, political order (expressed in increased intolerance to corruption and mismanagement), cultural estrangement (and related anti-immigrant sentiment), and income insecurity, as the economic component of the mix. By combining economic and physical safety, this agenda integrates the classic (for the late 20th-century paradigm) ideological oppositions between social justice (on the left) and law and order (on the right). In this sense, I have noted, precarity capitalism is marked by the replacement of the left-right divide with an opportunity-risk cleavage that places in opposition the ever-increasing number of those who feel threatened by the new economy of open borders and the IT revolution (the risk pole of voters) and an ever-decreasing number of those who profit from it (the opportunity pole) (Azmanova, 2004, 2020, 2021).

Another fallout from precarity is that the economic insecurity of the middle class has eroded its tendency to protect the interests of the poor, who are habitually politically inactive. Redistributive and other solidaristic policies during the three post-war decades were largely a result of the political will of the middle class to endure the economic burdens of redistribution. As the middle and upper-middle classes are now affected by precarity, their political

preferences become more introverted and increasingly conservative. Further up the social lather, insecurity is making political and economic elites focus on personal enrichment (note the rise of corruption and embezzlement scandals) at the risk of public humiliation.

Societies are in a state not of a crisis, which is an episodic moment with three possible outcomes: death, return to health, or radical transformation. Instead, they maintain a state of low fever, of chronic inflammation, a stasis: we feel that something is deeply wrong but do not have the mental energy, the will, or the know-how to get unstuck. As social theorist David Graeber has observed, today's times are governed by the assembly of a "giant machine designed, first and foremost, to destroy any sense of possible alternative futures" (Graeber, 2011, p. 524).

This sense of being stuck – of longing for change and at the same time dreading it – is a feature of precarity, whose essence is powerlessness – a state of fragility that deprives us of a sense of agency. One of the preconditions of transformative, emancipatory change is conspicuously missing. Such a change requires both an acute sense of injustice, of something being deeply wrong, and a sense of agency – a capacity and a will to act. While our societies abound in indignation against injustice, they are bereft of agency for radical politics. The epidemic of precarity has eradicated the will for radical change, even as discontent with the status quo is growing.

This condition of meta-crisis (or crisis of the crisis) has also affected social criticism and intellectual critique. We are captive of a few dangerous clichés, of powerful ideological certainties. One such cliché is the belief that the horizon of possible social models is demarcated by the choice between capitalism, socialism, or some mix of the two – hence the renewed enthusiasm for socialism that the discourse of "capitalism in crisis" has brought about.

And probably the most debilitating of our intellectual habits is to see radical change as being conditioned on the availability of a crisis, revolution, or utopia. Such a demanding set of preconditions is an excuse for inaction – it further disempowers us. But whether we need a utopia or not is the wrong question to ask. Currently, there is no captivating, empowering utopia. We need to find a way to press ahead without utopia illuminating the road ahead. We must proceed in obscurity if we are to advance at all.

Whatever gains progressive politics so far has managed to make, these have been pursued in the register of justice (i.e. against inequalities of wealth, against privileges, exclusion, discrimination, and abuse) rather than in the register of emancipation from the oppressive dynamics of precarity capitalism. Making inequality the centerpiece of the social justice debate is, however, short-sighted as struggles for equality inadvertently hamper more radical agendas of transformation. As philosopher Harry Frankfurt (2015) has noted, the poor suffer because they don't have enough, not because others have more and some far too much. Societies can be relatively egalitarian (just like the socialist societies were), or even completely equal, but still

affected by poverty and precarity. Even worse, the obsession with inequality is part of the neoliberal governmentality: it engages thinking in terms of comparisons between individuals and groups – thinking that is typical for the focus on the personal that neoliberalism nurtures. Thinking in terms of comparisons between individuals and the groups to which these individuals belong obscures the societal dimension, the commons. No matter how egalitarian our societies become through redistribution or how rich we individually might be, we, as individuals, would never be rich enough to secure for ourselves quality healthcare, as this requires enormous resources to be invested not only in medical provision but also in scientific research and public education. Thus, when framing our struggles for justice in terms of fighting inequality and exclusion (the register of justice), we fall prey to a fallacy I have called "the paradox of emancipation": as we fight for equality and inclusion, we increase the value of the deeply unjust social system within which we struggle to be included as equals (Azmanova, 2020, pp. 7–8, 208).

As a result of these pernicious dynamics at work both within the political economy of European societies and in their political culture (i.e. the sphere of intellectual critique and social criticism), Europe today is deficient of transformative energies exactly when the need for radical, systemic transformation is omnipresent and acute.

The sagacity of 1989

With two of its insights, the revolutions of 1989 offer a solution to our current predicament. The first one regards the false dichotomy between capitalism and socialism/communism as entities that delimit the horizon of thinkable alternatives. The second regards the place of Utopia. The anti-totalitarian struggles of the 1970s and 1980s were informed by the idea that an effective struggle against the socialist/communist regimes did not necessitate an espousal of capitalism. As Václav Havel observed, "these thoroughly ideological and often semantically confused categories have long since been beside the point" (Havel, 1991a, p. 263). Moreover, we, dissidents, did not see capitalism as a genuine alternative to socialism. Both systems engage exploitative logics that incurred environmental and human trauma. Václav Havel saw capitalism and socialism as incarnating the same exploitative, alienating logic. Under state socialism, as under democratic capitalism, he noted, people are afflicted by a condition he called *samopohyb*, which translates as "self-waste" – a malaise incurred by our submission to "the irrational momentum of anonymous, impersonal, and inhuman power – the power of ideologies, systems, apparatus, bureaucracy, artificial languages, and political slogans" (Havel, 1991a, p. 269).

This is even more true today: if we are serious about fighting the ecological crisis, we cannot return to the socialist regimes if socialism is understood as public ownership of the means of production. In the context of global market

competition, entities that are in public hands (either through state ownership or workers' ownership of companies) would be subjected to the same competitive pressures and would behave as capitalists in the pursuit of profit, with all the negative impacts on human life and the natural environment. So, it is essential that we free our thinking of the capitalism-vs-socialism dichotomy, including efforts to combine the two, as we seek radical social transformation. In this sense, radical change begins with the admission that socialism is a poor alternative to capitalism in the current junction.

The second invaluable idea of 1989 has to do with the method of intellectual critique and social criticism, namely, the role of Utopia. As Havel discussed in his 1978 essay "The Power of the Powerless," "if a better economic and political model is to be created . . . this is not something that can be designed and introduced like a new car. If it is to be more than just a new variation of the old degeneration, it must above all be an expression of life in the process of transforming itself" (Havel, 2018, p. 30). Some of the most important political impulses in Soviet bloc countries, Havel noted, came not from abstract projects for an ideal political or economic order but from

> the continuing and cruel tension between the complex demands of that system and the aims of life, that is, the elementary need of human beings to live, to a certain extent at least, in harmony with themselves, that is, to live in a bearable way, not to be humiliated by their superiors and officials, not to be continually watched by the police, to be able to express themselves freely, to find an outlet for their creativity, to enjoy legal security, and so on.
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> (Havel, 2018, pp. 29–30).

Indeed, the 1989 revolutions were not driven by a grand utopia but rather by a non-ideal, negativistic conception of emancipation from oppression, one aspiring to diminish suffering rather than to obtain a just society – a mode of commitment to change that Amy Allen (2015) has aptly called "emancipation without utopia." In my recollection, for quite a while, at least during the decade prior to the 1989 upheavals, the socialist societies were permeated by a sense that something was amiss, that something was not right. There was a plethora of grievances of injustice: from the privileges of the Communist party elite and their pions (the "nomenclatura" and the "apparatchiks"), political oppression, and lower living standards as compared to the west. However, there was one overarching narrative, expressed as "this is not normal." Thus, what guided our private and public revolts was not a distinct idea of an alternative form of life but rather an acute sense that the one we inhabited was pathological, abnormal. Václav Havel has argued that the source of the system's stability was the fact that individuals accepted the pretense of believing the lie: "[T]hey must live within a lie. They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted

their life with it and in it. For by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfill the system, make the system, are the system" (Have, 2018, p. 9) And yet, the very knowledge of living a lie also became a protective shield: one could retrieve into a space of freedom, having gone through the motions of pledging allegiance because it was the pledge that mattered, not the allegiance. Moreover, the shared knowledge of that pretense was liberating – the knowledge that we all lived a ritualized lie that demarcated a zone of authenticity where solidarities and a sense of agency could be nurtured.

About 10 years ago, the files of the Bulgarian Secret Service became public, and I was far from surprised to read about the following correspondence between the Service and the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The Party asked whether the dissidents posed a danger to the regime. The answer was: No, they are all good communists. That diagnosis was nominally correct: we opposed the regime not in the name of a radical alternative to communism, such as capitalism or a Western liberal democracy. But this diagnosis was wrong in the sense that our struggle was averse to ideological labels – we opposed a regime that had used the communist utopia to bring into existence a society beset by fear and precarity. The source of our radicalism was no grand utopia but a frustration with a reality that was in sharp conflict with the truth-narratives of the regime, a discrepancy between the doctrine of a solidaristic society and the reality of alienation that had transformed our everyday existence into a dystopia. The most unbearable and thus most energizing feature of any dystopia is not the sense of injustice or oppression; it is the sense of abnormality – when your everyday existence is felt as a pathology, the longing for normality becomes a powerful emancipatory drive.

Theodore Adorno's idea of negative utopianism captures very well the power of this peculiar knowledge. In a discussion with Ernst Bloch, Adorno remarks that even though "we do not know what the correct thing would be, we know exactly, to be sure, what the false thing is" (Adorno & Bloch, 1988, p. 12). Similarly, for Marcuse, "liberation from the repressive, from a bad, a false system . . . by forces developing within such a system" contain a powerful, positive "ought" (Marcuse, 1968). For Marcuse, emancipatory struggles are best guided by the idea of unrealized potentiality – an emancipated state that is already available within the circumstances of oppression.[8]

Critical theory's aversion to utopian blueprints can be traced back to Marx's preference to seek a given social formation's potential for emancipation (e.g. capitalism's internal contradictions and crises, the formation of the revolutionary subject) rather than design the just society in the style of utopian socialism. Indeed, Marx offered no detailed account of a post-capitalist society. In his writing, far from being an elaborate social model, communism is the realization of democracy as spontaneous self-organization of the people. This minimalist articulation of the contours of a just society is typical of the Frankfurt School tradition of critical social theory.

Anyway, whether we espouse Adorno's non-teleological approach to emancipation or Marcuse's idea of utopia as unrealized potentiality, it will be equally important to maintain what we might call the "ambitious pragmatism" of emancipation from the specific circumstances that oppress us. By this, I mean that diagnosing correctly the systemic drivers of injustice in a given historical junction and then fighting that injustice is the most powerful way to discover and actuate the unrealized potentialities of that historical context. This is what we did back in the 1980s: Our dreams were shy (a return to normality, "rejoining Europe"), but our pragmatism was ambitious: we did not want to overthrow socialism; we wanted to cleanse it from its pathologies (the privileges of the apparatchiks, the stifling of the freedom of speech and movement). If our revolutions were not sidetracked, we would have thus subverted autocratic socialism and transformed it into something else, something better, whose name we did not care to coin at the time.

And yet, for most of their part, the anti-totalitarian revolutions failed to create a genuine liberal democratic order – the post-communist societies have been infested with crony capitalism and pervasive political corruption. One popular hypothesis is that they lacked a coherent project of reform – that Havel's "politics of authenticity" was not a sufficient blueprint to guide the construction of a new reality. And yet, adopting the model of capitalist liberal democracies by joining the EU served as a very detailed, solidly institutionalized, action plan. But this readily available blueprint simply replaced the secularized religion of the communist utopia with the secularized religion of consumerism, ornamented with the rituals of electoral democracy.[9] With this, it derailed the non-utopian, pragmatist radical social transformation that had barely begun.

Conclusion

Well into the third decade of the 21st century, Europe's East and West are now united in a shared predicament. Afflicted by massive precarity, our societies are awash with discontent and paralyzed by a fear of change. One of the most likely ways to squander the meager opportunities we now have for emancipatory change is by getting entrapped in distributive conflicts and failing to question the justice of the system within which we seek inclusion and equality. To avoid this, we need to seek, behind the multitude of conflicting grievances, the common systemic drivers of injustice. I have argued that what generates massive precarity in the early 21st century is above all the intensification and the global spread of the profit motive, not the poor distribution of wealth or the forms of ownership of that wealth. As the profit motive is the constitutive principle of capitalism, even mundane attempts to counter the competitive pursuit of profit will help us subvert capitalism without the help of a crisis, revolution, or utopia.

What will come in its place? What shall we call that society that is free of capitalism's profit motive and of the autocratic penchant of socialism? Let us leave the search for labels for another day. This will be a brand-new world, and we can fight for it without knowing its name. All we need is that pragmatic hope that permeated the revolutions of 1989 – as Havel put it, not the optimistic "conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out" (Havel, 1991b, p. 123).

Notes

1 At that time, a colleague of mine told me he went to the headquarters of the Secret Service and gave free vent to his rage against the regime. He went home and packed a small bag of essentials waiting for his arrest. After three days, he unpacked.
2 The formal institutional framework of liberal democracy has been combined with oligarchy as a form of decisional power, where economic elites and organized groups representing business interests impact significantly government policy, "while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence" (Gilens and Page, 2014).
3 Piketty's project of "participatory socialism" contains three key elements: (1) significant equalizing redistribution of wealth based on "confiscatory" levels of wealth and income taxation; (2) worker participation in company boards; (3) a universal basic income of 120 euro that each is to receive at age 22. See Piketty (2022).
4 For a detailed account of rule of law backsliding in France and Spain, and the complicity of the European Commission with this process, see Azmanova and Howard (2021).
5 On the growth of autocratic rule within democracies see Zakaria (1997), Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), and Pech and Scheppele (2017).
6 The key role the European Union has played in engendering the neoliberal order within Europe and globally is amply recorded and analysed. See, for instance, Ryner (2019), Herman (2007), Pureza and Mortágua (2016), and İşleyen (2015). For an alternative view, see Haas et al. (2020). Here the authors establish that although no country was asked to lower social protection on balance, there is a tendency for the EU to ask governments to increase social protection while cutting spending, which can lead to recommendations for strong social protections being ignored.
7 I have discussed this new stage in the development of capitalism as "precarity capitalism" – see Azmanova (2020). I have further elaborated on the psychological experience of precarity as incapacity to cope and the implications for political agency in Azmanova (2022a, 2022b, 2023).
8 For a discussion of Marcuse's understanding of emancipation as a struggle for an unrealized potentiality, see Feenberg (2023).
9 On the similarity between communism and liberal democracy as forms of modernist ideology with a penchant for totalitarianism see also Legutko (2016).

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