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## **Viral Insurgencies: Can Capitalism Survive Covid?**

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### **1/ Civil protest – from event to social epicrisis**

“U.S. protests against police brutality and racial injustice intensify”, “Bulgaria engulfed in daily anti-corruptions protests”, “Protests turn violent in Beirut as anger against leaders grows” – news headlines in early August 2020 display the unlikely eventfulness of radicalism in the time of pandemic.

Surely, an acute public health crisis is more likely to focus the said publics’ mind on the mundane emergencies of personal survival or even on the exalted metaphysics of human frailty – with both activities best done in solitude, than incite mass insurgencies, remarkable in their ubiquity and duration, about the state of democracy and the nature of rule. Indeed, the civil unrest that erupted amid the Covid-19 pandemic in some (at least nominally) democratic countries<sup>2</sup> seemed odd. Not simply because the participants – mostly younger adults from the middle and upper-middle classes (Barroso and Minkin, 2020) who tend to take the health

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<sup>1</sup> I have profited from discussions with Eilish Anderson, Victor Elgersma, Azar Dakwar, Raphael Wolf, Daniel Lopez Perez, Jaime Aznar Erasun, Kiril Nikolov, Anastas Gueordjev, Jonathan Klein, Claus Offe, Keally McBride, Amy Allen, Maria Cernat, Jacqueline Cessou, Seyla Benhabib and James Galbraith, which have helped advance and clarify my argument.

<sup>2</sup> I refer here to political democracy in a descriptive sense, as a matter of parliamentary representation based on universal franchise, and of constitutionally protected basic liberties such as the freedom of assembly. By that criterion, the U.S., Lebanon and Bulgaria qualify as democracies. It should be noted, however, that the Economist’s Democracy Index classifies the U.S. as ‘full democracy’, Bulgaria as ‘flawed democracy’, and Lebanon as a ‘hybrid regime’. Bulgaria and the U.S. had a score of 9.17 out of 10 for the factor ‘electoral process and pluralism’ in 2019; Lebanon – 3.92 (EIU 2020). The United States has been characterized as oligarchy on grounds that policy reflects the preferences of elites rather than those of the average citizens (Gilens and Page 2014). Bulgaria is considered a textbook case of institutionalized corruption, and democracy in Lebanon is strongly constrained by a sectarian distribution of political office among the main religious groups and the influence of Hizbollah, the Shia Islamist militia and political party. Yet, in all three countries general elections are a main mechanism of democratic accountability and political change.

emergency seriously – violate the social distancing measures they in principle support.<sup>3</sup> The protests are extraordinary also because they have not voiced any pandemic-related grievances, such as governments' failure to manage efficiently the public health crisis, or the fact that the pandemic and the measures for coping with it are hurting the poor and the already vulnerable minorities disproportionately. The death and economic devastation that the pandemic has wreaked did not trigger protests about such bread-and-butter issues as impoverishment and job loss – like the Yellow Vests had done in France in 2018, when a planned 'climate tax' on fuel threatened to aggravate further the effect of austerity policies. Such a reaction could reasonably be expected. In June, the World Bank (2020) warned that the world is on the precipice of the deepest slump since 1945 with up to 60 million people being pushed into poverty; the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank reported the worst decline in output and employment in 90 years, and the European Central Bank announced that Europe has entered its biggest economic crisis in peacetime (WB 2020; Smialek and Rappeport 2020; ECB 2020) .

These protests are not even about a phenomenon widely bemoaned in recent years – the spectacular economic inequalities that, we have been told time and again, are the great scourge of our societies (Atkinson 2015; Dorling 2015; Piketty 2019, 2014, 2008; Stiglitz 2012, 2015). In a word, these protests have nothing to do with the three great political credos that have defined progressive politics for a long time – Redistribution, Recognition and Representation. What are, then, these uprisings, these eruptions of 'pandemic radicalism', telling us about the state of democracy? Can they help us obtain a somewhat plausible epicrisis, a critical assessment, of our societies' state of health?

At first sight, the three cases have little in common -- the particular *claims to suffered injustice* hardly bear comparison: In the U.S. the murder of George Floyd, a Black man, by the police unleashed decades of built-up public anger with racial discrimination and abuse of power; in Bulgaria, people took to the streets to protest the grip on the economy and the media oligarchs hold with the blessing of ruling elites; in Lebanon, citizens accused the government of negligence that led to a gigantic explosion in the Port of Beirut that demolished vast swaths of the city. However, precisely because of these differences, articulating a common

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<sup>3</sup> According to a Washington Post/University of Maryland poll in May 2020, most Americans support social distancing measures (such as wearing a mask, staying at home when possible, avoiding gatherings and keeping 6 feet away from others in public). Democrats are more likely than Republicans to say these measures are important (WP/UM 2020). The attendees of George Floyd rallies are more likely to lean toward the Democratic Party; they are more racially and ethnically diverse, and younger than Americans overall (Barroso and Minkin 2020).

denominator could be a heuristic tool for going beyond the singular events and into the systemic dynamic that gives them their larger social and historical significance.

Indisputably, these insurgencies are deliberate ruptures in the political common sense, in the logic of rule, as they disrupt public order. But more importantly, they also constitute ruptures in these societies' habitual *logic of dissent*, and not only because they are taking place seemingly at the wrong time - a raging pandemic -- while expressing a grievance seemingly unrelated to coping with it. They represent a rupture in the logic of dissent in a yet more bewildering way. In Lebanon, the protesters accused their government of corruption and mismanagement, and forced it to resign -- a government that had come to power only half a year earlier on an explicit mandate to crack down on corruption. The cabinet had received the briefing about explosives having been stored for six years in the Port of Beirut just 14 days prior to the explosion and had promptly triggered the required procedure (Nakhoul and Bassam 2020). In Bulgaria, the protesters demanded the resignation of a government that had come to power on a mandate for curbing corruption in the public administration *three times* in general elections. Moreover, the equanimity with which Bulgarians have tolerated endemic corruption for three decades has become a trademark of the post-communist reality. Why the rebellion now, when the public health emergency gives excellent reasons for the authorities to retaliate? In the United States, the Black Lives Matter movement has gained much public support, and issues of racial equality and police reform have received a significant uptake in state and federal policy, resulting in a consistent decline in police shooting of African Americans since the movement began to mobilize in 2013 (Yglesias 2020).<sup>4</sup> The Floyd uprisings are taking place just a few months before the presidential elections, which is typically a propitious time for affecting the policy agenda through electoral mobilization, rather than street protest. And the most absurd development: as soon as the protests erupted, a dramatic rise in gun violence in Black communities across the country took place, together with an unprecedented rise in police

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<sup>4</sup> In June 2020, a poll by the Pew Research Center registered a wide public support to the Black Lives Matter movement and its main concerns (Parker, Horowitz, and Anderson 2020). According to data collected by the independent research collective Mapping Police Violence, the number of black people killed by police officers has declined by about 10 percent between 2013 and 2019 (<https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>, accessed on 8/14/2020.) Among the most significant changes in U.S. policing since the Civil Rights era has been the recruitment of thousands of Black officers across the country.

violence (Taylor K-Y. 2020) – as if to highlight the futility of the uprisings while mocking their progressive aspirations.<sup>5</sup>

But these instances of popular radicalism in the times of pandemic are a suitable empirical entry point for investigating the relationship between event and systemic dynamics. This is the case because apparent anomalies invite a form of critique that ventures beyond discussions about the normative acceptability and factological congruence of events. To make sense of a social anomaly, we are obliged to approach it as a symptom of larger societal dynamics and discern the structural peculiarities of a social system's operation. This means inquiring about the prevailing pattern of the distribution of life-chances, the key institutions that structure that distribution; and finally, the systemic (ordering) logic of social relations that shapes what is considered a fair social order and life-chances worthy of being pursued within that order.<sup>6</sup> In other words, in order to establish the nature of civil protest, we need to ask: What are the uprisings challenging-- the distribution of power, the institutions that structure that distribution, or the social system within which this structuring takes place? In what follows, I will focus on the U.S. case, and will undertake an investigation into the systemic dynamics of which the radical public discontent of the summer of 2020 might be a symptom. Approaching the U.S. protests with reference to insurgencies in Bulgaria and Lebanon that took place at that same time will serve as a narrative device with a heuristic function.

What is, then, the underlying **ordering logic** of these incongruent eruptions of public discontent? These insurgencies could be seen, so I will argue, as something yet more radical than the calls for *equality* and *inclusion* (within the existing system) that had defined progressive politics in western democracies throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and until recently. They can be seen, instead, as *systemic disruptions*: a rejection of the political economy, institutional logistics and social dispositions that actuate democratic capitalism as a social and political system.

## 2/ Protests and the 'paradox of emancipation'

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<sup>5</sup> "In Chicago, the shootings began almost simultaneously with the anti-brutality rebellion in the streets. Six days after the murder of George Floyd, on May 31st, eighteen people were murdered in Chicago, most of them Black. Never before in the sixty years during which such statistics have been kept had that number of people been killed by gun violence in a single twenty-four-hour period." (Taylor, K-Y. 2020.)

<sup>6</sup>By social system I mean a system of social relations, itself constituted of practices and interactions; I do not espouse a structural-functionalist approach which is often, and wrongly, equated with a systemic social ontology. I owe the wording 'ordering logic of the system' to Eilish Rose Anderson. This notion complements the trilogy of concepts I use in my analysis of a social system, namely 'operative principle' (or 'constitutive dynamic'), 'structuring institutions' and 'distributive outcomes' (Azmanova 2018; 2020a).

What these three sets of public protests share, beyond obvious differences in the claims they voice to suffered injustice, is a shared quality of the *nature* of that grievance. They dispute the socio-political system as a whole, rather than just the unfair distribution of power within that system, as has been the habit of progressive politics for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this way, all three sets of protests escape what I have called ‘the paradox of emancipation’.

The paradox haunting progressive politics is the following. Most often, grievances of suffered injustice concern the asymmetrical distribution of power among individuals and groups, leading to inequality and exclusion. The typical remedies for such harm (I’ve called it ‘relational injustice’ as it is experienced by group *in relation* to another) are policies of inclusion and equalization such as political representation, economic redistribution, and cultural recognition. However, such struggles for justice not only often fail to question the system within which equality and inclusion are being sought but might further increase the value of an unjust system by force of demanding access to it and equity within it. Thus, as second-generation feminists fought for women’s inclusion in the labor market on a par with men, they inadvertently glorified the system of exploitation within which they were seeking gender justice (Fraser 2009, Azmanova 2016). Similarly, the unfairness of inequality has become the dominant frame of social protest since the Occupy movement proudly stated, “We are the 99 percent” in 2011. This indignation against a thoroughly rigged system was subsequently reframed by powerful voices as a protest against economic inequality.<sup>7</sup> But remonstrations against inequality present the matter of capitalism’s numerous and grave failures as issues that can be tackled with a dose of redistributive policies and strengthened oversight. “Tax the rich” calls, which have become the rallying cry of the Left, inadvertently glorify the system that generates wealth that is to be taxed and distributed – a process that, as the inclusive prosperity of the post- WWII Welfare State made clear, has wrecked our natural environment. Thus, what appears to be a radical challenge to the system often unwittingly reinforces it, as we inevitably validate the model of life within which we seek inclusion and equality.

At their best, struggles against racial and gender injustice have sought to eliminate the racialization and the gendering of social roles (i.e. the social relevance of race and gender) – that is, they have targeted the very institutions enabling the unfair distribution of life-

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<sup>7</sup> “[A] dangerous and growing inequality and lack of upward mobility ... is the defining challenge of our time [...] a family in the top 1 percent has a net worth 288 times higher than the typical family, which is a record for this country.”, declared U.S. President Barack Obama (2013). At about the same time, U.S. economist and Nobel laureate Robert Shiller (2013) declared that “rising inequality in the United States and elsewhere in the world” was the most important problem faced by society. Research centers and even academic degrees in “inequality studies” have mushroomed over the past decade.

chances. Martin Luther King Jr.'s appeal for ending racial injustice was a call not only for equality but for de-racializing social relations in the U.S. ("I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.") The notion of deracialized citizenship was also implied in the U.S. Supreme Court's historic *Brown vs Board of Education* decision of 1952, which repealed the "separate but equal" doctrine that had enabled racial segregation (Azmanova, 2012a:6).<sup>8</sup>

However, often the paradox of emancipation is not avoided even when struggles for justice target not just the unequal distribution of assets and status (relational injustice), but also the institutions which create the pattern of that unjust distribution (structural injustice). Thus, critics of capitalism who advocate worker ownership of companies as a solution to the plight of the working class (e.g. Piketty 2019), tacitly endorse the probability that such a move would bring workers to identify more strongly with their companies, and become more complicit with the competitive production of profit – the systemic dynamic of capitalism. This, in turn, creates the likelihood that these worker preferences are translated, through democratic elections, into a political stance in favor of capitalism (the phenomenon of working-class conservatism). The institution of private ownership and management of the means of production is effectively the structure that enables exploitation and should be a target of progressive politics. However, replacing private property with a collective property will not necessarily undermine capitalism as a social system – on the contrary, it might reinforce it – as the example of China suggests.

It is this trap – the paradox of emancipation -- that the uprisings in the summer of 2020 have effectively, and gloriously, managed to avoid. In line with the Civil Rights anti-discrimination agenda, initially the Black Lives Matter's focus was the historic anti-black racism in policing (a form of relational injustice). On the one hand, the perspective of equality and non-discrimination within a system prone to violence is absurd as a narrative of justice (all of us becoming equally subjected to the abuse of power would not advance us much, would it?). Indeed, the Mapping Police Violence project reports that, even as the number of Black people killed by police officers has been declining, there is a parallel rise in deaths of armed Hispanics or people of unknown race. The relational injustice is not being solved; it is being altered.

On the other hand, the history of police reform has made it clear that even as the institution has been successfully reformed (through increased recruitment of Black police

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<sup>8</sup> This is not to suggest that the Civil Rights and the feminist movements are invariably afflicted by the paradox of emancipation; this tends to be the case when such struggles take the form of identity politics. On the way the feminist movement can target structural and systemic injustice see, for instance, Fraser (2009), Lorber (2000), and Azmanova (2012b; 2016).

officers, bans on chokeholds, changing the reporting systems for use of force incidents, requiring officers to intervene when they witness misconduct) this has not solved the problem. In 2020, George Floyd was murdered by an officer applying a chokehold – at the time legal in Minneapolis – as three other officers violated their ‘duty to intervene’. Efforts to solve the problem of police violence by reforming the police in fact deepened reliance on the police, contributed to making the police a central mechanism for securing not only order, but social integration, and legitimated the expansion of the role of the police in certain contexts (like patrolling schools and neighborhoods). Had the protests only required police reform, they would have been trapped in the paradox of emancipation. They didn’t.

The failure of institutional reforms and the apparent absurdity of demanding non-discrimination within a deeply abusive system has steered public protest towards the deeper, *systemic* drivers of injustice. Thus, very quickly a parallel trajectory of protest emerged – of rejecting police violence in general (going beyond relational injustice) and opposing the use of law enforcement as a substitute for social integration (going beyond structural injustice). This is what the call for defunding, and even dismantling the police, stands for – a rejection of a system that actively generates social decay and then resorts to violence to cope with social disorder.

By engaging in this second trajectory of protest, the George Floyd uprisings have side-stepped the paradox of emancipation. Rather than endorsing the existing system by demanding equal treatment within it, they are raising the issue of the *type of system* within which the fair distribution of life-chances is to be obtained. Similarly, the protests in Bulgaria and Lebanon in the summer of 2020 questioned not the unequal distribution of resources (although a third of Lebanese are jobless and half live below the poverty line, Bulgaria is the poorest country in the European Union) but the whole system of rule. But how can we obtain access to the systemic drivers of injustice? Can these protests tell us something about the specificity of the social system that breeds these eruptions?

As they mobilize discontent against the pervasive coupling of the relational injustice of discrimination and the structural injustice of police violence against civilians, the uprisings are indicating the existence of a systemic link between the two. It is not just that Blacks are being systematically excluded from the American dream, but the dream itself seems to necessitate forms of oppression that surpass the harms of inequality and exclusion.

The link between relational and structural injustice that sheds light on systemic injustice is the following. When examined together, a common denominator among the three sets of protests comes into view: their object is the *nature of power*, rather than its *distribution*. The



protests are objecting to a type of political rule that I have named 'socially irresponsible rule' – rule that pursues, and often attains, otherwise worthy policy goals but neglects the larger and longer-term impact on society (Azmanova 2013). Significantly, socially irresponsible rule might even be *responsive* to democratic demands (such as lowering taxation, ensuring economic growth and cheap consumer goods).

Socially irresponsible rule is more easily discerned in the case of rogue democracies such as Bulgaria and Lebanon. Thus, the culprit for Lebanon's current political malaise is the entrenched political class of warlords or "chiefs" whose criminal negligence of pressing societal needs reached a staggering scale long before the port explosion devastated Beirut. However, the design of Lebanon's political set-up was adopted thirty years ago in order to effectively end the 15-year civil war, by ensuring that the Christian, Sunni, Shia and Druze communities share power through sectarian quotas. This arrangement effectively mitigated the conflict, but it also bred corruption and incompetence which resulted in mismanagement, incompetence and negligence that has brought society to ruin. In the case of Bulgaria, the strongman Boyko Borissov (a former bodyguard of the communist dictator Jivkov) rose to power in 2009 by promising to end the conflict between the former communists and the anti-communist political formations and the oligarchic networks through which both sides were plundering the state resources after the fall of the dictatorship in 1990. He effectively achieved that stability but by way of streamlining and subjugating, rather than eradicating, the networks of corruption, thus fashioning a full symbiosis between power, (economic) oligarchs and corruption, and securing his grip on society through a corrupt and clientelistic party that controls the judiciary.

In the case of Western democracies, socially irresponsible rule might share some of the above characteristics (entrenched political elites acting against society's larger interests) but is of different origin. Its genesis has to do with the way the transformation of capitalism at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has affected public authority's political logic and policy logistics – and its relation to society. The neglect of public services (including healthcare) and the autocratic style of rule are mutually necessitating cornerstones of the new state-society relation. This transformation has also affected the nature of social protest. I turn to these parallel dynamics of the evolution of capitalism and the evolution of social protest.

### **3. Capitalism and dissent**

To discern the underlying logic of radicalism-amidst-pandemic that is directed, be it only in terms of its drivers if not overt goals, against the overarching social order, we need to position these protests within a longer continuum of anti-establishment upheaval. The biography of these insurgencies begins well before the pandemic of 2020, before even the financial meltdown of 2008, when the Occupy Movement gave voice to a nebulous malaise that was afflicting the 99%. Their inception dates to the 1990s. Three peculiarities defined that decade. First, this was the most prosperous one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in terms of economic growth (Stiglitz 2003). Second, at this time, ideologically unconventional parties and movements began mobilizing (from the *Pym Fortuyn List* in the Netherlands and the *White March* movement in Belgium, to *ATTAC* in France, the *Margherita* alliance in Italy, and *Bloco de Esquerda* in Portugal) – parties which opposed globalization but espoused free market capitalism domestically while also demanding social protection. Third, this was also the decade when neoliberalism triumphed.

Neoliberalism has two pillars: (1) individuals are held responsible for a thriving society; (2) governments are held responsible for a thriving business environment. The latter element had emerged already within the post-war interventionist Welfare state, as governments actively managed domestic economies to mitigate economic crisis. In the three post-war decades this was done through an active stimulation of production and consumption at the cost of irreparable ecological damage. In the 1980s, in order to deliver on their commitment to increasing prosperity, governments across the left-right political divide embarked on what has become known as the (third wave) of globalization: the pursuit of economies of scale via global economic integration which provided lucrative market access, thereby rapidly increasing returns on investment. The digitalization of the economy simplified this process as it allowed businesses to attain global reach with minimal cross-border investment.

However, the inauguration of globally integrated capitalism imposed a new policy priority: that of maintaining the *competitiveness* of national economies in the global market, where capitalist democracies were competing not only among themselves, but also with the autocratic capitalism of the likes of China who maintained (at least initially) their competitive advantage by suppressing domestic consumption and depressing wages, as well as by foregoing compliance with norms of environmental sustainability. For Western governments, coping with these new competitive pressures entailed applying to themselves those ‘structural adjustment’ policies they had previously prescribed to developing countries as conditionality for financial aid (as per the Washington Consensus policy formula): typically, labor-market deregulation, cuts to public services and social insurance, and privatization of public assets. The

desired objectives of increased competitiveness and growth were effectively achieved, notwithstanding yearly fluctuations and despite the financial meltdown of 2008-2009.

Prosperity, however, came at a heavy social price. 'Trickle-down' claims notwithstanding, the competitive pressures on the whole society intensified and broadened. This increase in pressures took place along two routes. On the one hand, due to labor market deregulation and automation (the latter allowed jobs outsourcing in search of cheaper labor force) the political economy no longer supplied employment as a stable source of livelihood. On the other hand, the thinning social safety net (due to cuts to public spending on social services and social insurance), made reliance on employment as a source of livelihood even more pressing. Individuals were forced to assume responsibility for impossible tasks such as remaining employable and employed within a political economy that does not produce sufficient number of stable jobs or securing for themselves a robust healthcare and educational system – something that requires hefty public investment. This generated a social condition which I have described as a massive precarization of society – a state of economic and social insecurity that ails not just the most vulnerable (what sociologist Guy Standing has called 'the precariat'), but the great majority, irrespectively of class, revenue, education, race or gender. It is precarity, not inequality, that ails the 99% in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Azmanova 2020a). Thus, in the course of the post-war transformations of capitalism the policy commitment to prosperity was effectively attained first through intensified production and consumption with nefarious ecological impact, and later through intensified competitive pressure that have wrecked individuals, their families, communities, as well as their natural environment. It is through the device of socially irresponsible rule that neoliberalism eventually engendered a new social order – that of 'precarity capitalism' (Ibid. 105-135))

Surely, there is a significant stratification within precarity – and this is a grave concern indeed, especially when precarity combines with impoverishment. But what is important to realize is that the *structural engine* behind such conflicting experiences of injustice as, on the one hand, the mental health crisis experienced by those trapped in the 'always on' economy (the purported 'winners' of globalization) and, on the other, the impoverishment of those unable to enter the labor market (the 'losers' of globalization), is the same – increased competition within globally integrated capitalism. The competitive pressures and the precarization of society will persist if our societies were to become less unequal, or even perfectly equal. This is the case because the root of precarization is not economic inequality, but the competitive pursuit of profit – the very constitutive dynamic of capitalism. These pressures are also likely to persist if

workers were to assume the property and management of the companies that employ them – as long as these workers' livelihoods depend on how successfully their companies play the game of competition for profit within globally integrated capitalism.

While neoliberalism drew its legitimacy from a notion of individual self-reliance in chasing exciting opportunities -- what Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) have called “the new spirit of capitalism”, precarity capitalism motivates through fear.<sup>9</sup> What is being currently demonized in the mainstream media and academic work as “populism” and dismissed as a transient expression of discontent, is in fact an expression of broadly shared and lasting anxiety triggered by perceptions of (experienced or anticipated) physical insecurity, political disorder, cultural estrangement, and employment insecurity resulting from employment flexibilization, job outsourcing, or competition with immigrants for jobs. These are the four ingredients of a new anti-precarity (order-and-security) public agenda that began taking shape in the 1990s – in a context of strong economic growth and low unemployment for most Western societies. At the same time, corruption and mismanagement scandals plagued the business and political establishment, and trust in ruling elites plummeted. The destabilization of the socioeconomic environment (despite growth) and the discrediting of the establishment prompted populist leaders to gain unprecedented support by alleging that ruling elites were reaping the benefits of growing prosperity yet leaving society in ruins (Azmanova 2004). The global financial crisis exacerbated this situation by repackaging the structural adjustment policies into ‘austerity policy’ that was implemented for the sake of stabilising the financial parameters of the economy (namely, through the combination between further cuts in public spending and low interest rates to stimulate borrowing).

The inequality within precarity – for instance, the fact that the pandemic has hit African American communities in the U.S. particularly hard – is not an accidental feature of the system. The economic logic of capitalism – the competitive production of profit – might be fully inclusive in giving anyone access to the labor market irrespectively of gender, race, ethnicity or age (Walzer, 2020). However, the egalitarian and inclusive logic in the operation of capitalism as an *economic* system is coupled with a logic of relentless stratification in the operation of capitalism as a *social* system. In fact, the more inclusive the economic system becomes (through breaking down barriers to market entry), the bigger the competitive pressures on all participants become.

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<sup>9</sup> Note for instance that, while the neoliberal paradigm was still concerned with employment in terms of overall economic growth and efficiency, the new one addresses unemployment in terms of fear, loss, and marginalization (I owe this observation to Claus Offe, in a personal conversation).

This, in turn, creates stronger incentives for bringing in non-economic norms of social stratification (based on race, age, education, religion, ethnicity, geographical provenance). Such norms are brought into play by the extant dominant groups in order to preserve their privileges by attenuating for themselves the competitive pressures the economy generates. Thus, the gendering and racialization of social roles, and the stratification of life-chances according to race and gender, allows for the competitive pressures on some groups (white men) to diminish, thereby ensuring their structurally secured positions of privilege. For historical reasons, in the U.S. context, race is the strongest mechanism through which the distribution of competitive advantage within the game of pursuit of profit (aka capitalism) takes place. Ergo -- the forever unfinished business of the Civil Rights movement. Since the abolition of slavery, African Americans have been eagerly welcomed into the economic game (as wage labor to be freely exploited) – and as occupants of the lower steps in the ladder of stratified social advantage. The massification of precarity in recent years has only increased demands for non-economic sources of social stratification – hence, the rise of White supremacy.

A corollary to the precarisation of society is the increased autocratic style of the state's response – because public authority had absolved itself of all social responsibility save for the operation of the economy. To social disintegration, the state responds with security measures - from criminalization of poverty, to extending the police's domain of operation, to curbing migration and the deployment of federal troops against BLM protests.<sup>10</sup>

The nature of social protest during the Great Recession (the decade following the 2008 economic crisis) signaled the incapacity of liberal democracies to effectively embark on a path for radical renewal. Even in its most remarkable forms (the *Occupy* movements in New York and elsewhere, the Indignados upheaval in Spain, the *Yellow Vests* protests in France) these movements expressed frustrations with the existing order, but were remarkably non-radical: as the famous slogan of the Spanish Indignados put it, “We are not against the system. The system is against us”. This was a plea for a more inclusive and more egalitarian system, not for its radical overhaul. Civil unrest and social criticism were trapped in the paradox of emancipation.

The moderate nature of public protest in this period is an element of what I have called a

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<sup>10</sup> “Many consequences of poverty have been turned into crimes, including sleeping in cars or public places, panhandling for money or food, public urination, shoplifting, and many other things that poor people do when they do not have the privacy and discretion of their own residence. The criminalization of poverty deepens its inescapability by putting the poor into direct contact with the police. These developments have outsized impacts on African-Americans, who are far more likely than whites to be poor.” (Taylor, K-Y 2020)

'metacrisis of capitalism' – a condition of inflammation, a prolonged low fever and persistent anxiety which is not a veritable crisis as it entails neither of the three typical exits from a crisis: death, normalization, or radical transformation. A decade into the financial collapse of 2007-2009, the capitalist economy had recovered, yet our societies had not restored their sense of normalcy and discourses about crisis abounded, without however tangible prospects for a radical transformation. Instead of generating the radicalization of the working class anticipated by the Left, the massive precarity that globally integrated capitalism had inflicted, combined with the lack of plausible utopias (as communism and socialism never fully recovered their appeal after having been hijacked by the totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe), was fostering conservative, even reactionary instincts. It is fear of freedom rather than desire for bold social experimentation that has been the prevailing mood in capitalist democracies in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Precarity is at the root of the phenomenon of working-class conservatism that fueled the vote for Brexit in the U.K. and for Donald Trump in the U.S.

Thus, the social crisis itself entered a crisis (a crisis of the crisis, a 'metacrisis'): society perceived itself in crisis yet lacked the energy and the mechanisms for a radical transformation (Azmanova, 2020a, 2020b). Democratic elections – the main mechanism through which liberal democracies decide the course of their innovation -- gave voice to desires for stability: at the nadir of the economic crisis in Europe and the U.S. the vote in democratic elections persistently increased for center-right (conservative) and far-right (xenophobic) parties. Indeed, the institutions of democratic representation, even when well-functioning, cannot but translate the aversion to change that precarity breeds, although the need for change is unprecedented.

#### **4/ From pathogen to pandemic: the political know-how**

It is in this context of mass precarity that the Covid-19 pandemic germinated in the spring of 2020. In our century, a viral contamination does not become a pandemic all on its own – not in the affluent capitalist democracies who possess the financial means and scientific know-how to edit DNA and to detect gravitational waves in the cosmic curvature of spacetime. Neither does a pathogen generate a pandemic in such societies due to accidents and erroneous judgments. This is a fruit of ideas and policies, a consequence of what I called "socially irresponsible rule' – rule aimed at maximizing prosperity without regard for society's wellbeing. Our healthcare systems are overwhelmed not because this is a rare natural disaster for which no government

can ever have on-hand capacity to cope, but because governments have been under-funding public healthcare for decades, neglecting medical infrastructure, and outsourcing the production of key ingredients to countries with cheap labor, complying with the economic logic of ‘just-on-time’ delivery which imperiled the availability of medical essentials.<sup>11</sup>

Absent from the edifice of neoliberalism and its off-shoot, precarity capitalism, is a component that allows privately affluent societies to truly thrive – a robust public sector, shielded from the profit motive. In *The Affluent Society*, published in 1958, John Kenneth Galbraith had cautioned that shrinking the public sector would have deleterious consequences for both our societies and our natural environment. Yet this is the path that capitalist democracies have actively pursued, especially since the 1980s. Thus, while neoliberal globalisation made formidable advances, public-health capacity was being eroded, as it was subjected to the logic of market efficiency. The subsequent fragilization of society was well known to the scientific community, the political establishment and the general public. A 2006 headline in the *Wall Street Journal* warns: “Just-in-Time Inventories Make U.S. Vulnerable in a Pandemic: Low Stockpiles at Hospitals Boost Efficiency but Leave No Extras for Flu Outbreak” (Wysocki Jr. and Lueck, 2006). In 2010, the U.S. National Academy of Medicine commissioned a report on the impact of budget cuts on public health preparedness for catastrophic events. The report stated in no uncertain terms the gravity of the situation: “As state and local health departments fail to invest adequately in biosurveillance infrastructure and lose their epidemiological expertise, the resulting decrease in capabilities makes the nation significantly less secure against intentional and naturally occurring health threats.” (Guyton and Buccina, 2011:33).<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein, the European Commission proposed in 2017 to invest more heavily in vaccines through a public-private partnership called the Innovative Medicines Initiative. But seeing it as unprofitable, the drug companies rightly objected. The project was dropped (Boffrey 2020). While one cannot reproach an economic actor such as a private pharmaceutical company to be driven by the profit motive, when public authority does this, it amounts to a deliberate abnegation of its duty as a custodian of the public welfare. The US, under the

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<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the political responsibility for the pandemic see Galbraith 2020a, 2020b; Galbraith and Azmanova 2020.

<sup>12</sup> The survey established a widespread concern among the interviewed practitioners “that were a pandemic to occur in the near future, funding cuts would prevent a repeat of what health officials and subject matter experts felt was a robust 2009 response” (Guyton and Buccina, 2011:33)

presidency of Donald Trump, dismantled a pandemic response team at the National Security Council and cut funding for the Centers for Disease Control – all in the name of economic rationality (Riechmann, 2020; Taylor M. 2020). It is no wonder that as the contamination spread, governments in the rich Global North proved unable to provide the basic face masks medical staff needed to save their own lives and those of others from the novel coronavirus. In the US, testing was botched, delayed and for a long time not available on demand. In France, vast stocks of personal protective equipment, accumulated for the H1N1 epidemic, had been sold off, or stored improperly and ruined.

These were not mere mistakes or simple accidents: they were the result of political decisions through which a socially irresponsible rule has been systematically enacted. Failing to safeguard society from the well-known adverse outcomes of a policy course bespeaks of a staggering level of dereliction at the top – a state of the body politic not unlike that in countries like Lebanon and Bulgaria, clientelistic regimes plagued by endemic corruption, criminal negligence and incompetence. And yet, the political establishment in Western democracies, has very little sense of having failed their societies. It was telling that at the very moment when President of the European Central Bank Christine Lagarde announced at the European Parliament that the European economy is on the brink of collapse, she added that this ‘unprecedented crisis’ in Europe’s postwar history was “of no one’s fault or making” (Banks 2020.)

There are three structural drivers for supplanting the democratic political ethos of rule in the public interest with a socially irresponsible rule typical for failing states. First, economic rationality overtakes political judgment – *raison d'état* is replaced by *raison d'économie* (or rather *raison d'économie* functions as *raison d'état*). Second, political elites, across the ideological spectrum, offload social responsibility to citizens and their communities, often in the name of democracy. Third, public authority, which has entirely redefined its mandate in terms of serving the economy, copes with the resulting massive precarity through law-and-order tools: social integration is enforced, not nurtured (ergo, the growing importance of the police). Together, these three factors have engendered the massive precarity of individuals, the fragility of our societies, and the shift to autocratic rule. The Covid pandemic is only one disastrous outcome of this perilous policy logic. It is our Beirut blast.

## **5. Our neoliberal fight against the pandemic**



In fighting the pandemic, our societies are deploying the very same policy logic that created our current predicament. To recall, neoliberalism rests on three pillars (1) public authority's offloading social responsibility to individuals and their communities, often in the name of democracy; and (2) governments' adopting of economic rationality as political common-sense; (3) it used law enforcement measures to uphold order in precaritized, disintegrating society. Exactly this policy logic has been guiding the fight against the coronavirus epidemic.

While in the United Kingdom and Sweden the authorities thought first to let the virus run free, seeking 'herd immunity' at the implicit price of many thousands dead, most governments imposed a lock-down (citizens were ordered to stay home). Social distancing was enforced with the means of Martial law. Both methods – the hand-off approach and the iron-fist approach are two iterations of the neoliberal logic, to the extent that governments did not make a consistent effort to build a robust public healthcare capacity. Indeed, the lock-down was supposed to help slow down the contamination in order to build up sufficient healthcare capacity to deal with the virus. However, while governments ran to the rescue of the economy to sustain business activity<sup>13</sup>, shortages of tests, masks, and medical equipment persisted. Even countries with solid health-care systems like Germany and Belgium to protect their medical workers and to boost long-term public health capacity, prompting demonstrations by hospital staff.

Civil participation and acts of solidarity were well publicized and celebrated as hope-inspiring evidence of our communities' resilience. Governments called on universities to help with innovative ideas and counted on businesses for practical solutions. Responsibility was thus being offloaded onto individuals (as citizens, professionals, entrepreneurs) under the guise of 'participatory democracy', while societies were becoming more precarious as they were made to rely on businesses' good will and individuals' self-sacrifice for critical public service such as emergency healthcare.

Fighting the pandemic in this individualistic way is a typical neoliberal policy artifact. The confinement measures were treated as an end in themselves and an opportunity for our heads of states to showcase war-time leadership, while neglecting to implement other measures requested by the World Health Organization, such as setting up massive and systemic screening for the infection, training of personnel and building new health infrastructures. The strict enforcement of confinement via law-and-order measures (and subsequently lifting them)

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<sup>13</sup>. European States adopted measures akin to a Marshal plan for stabilising the European economies; in the Unites States, a \$2 trillion economic stimulus package provided funds, in April 2020, both to households and businesses.

while failing to implement rigorous testing and tracing regimes thus amounts to coronavirus ‘greenwashing’ – doing the absolute least with maximum fanfare. Thus, despite much rhetoric about the “return of Big State”, Western governments remain trapped in the very neoliberal policy logic that brought us here – namely socially irresponsible rule with its twin dynamics – the precarization of society and counteracting that precarity through law-and-order policies.

## **6/ Back to the crisis of capitalism?**

Could it be that Covid-19 is putting an end to the metacrisis of democratic capitalism and opening a path for radical mobilization able to press for a systemic change? People are taking a risk with their lives (as public gatherings increase the likelihood of contamination) to protest the failures of liberal democracies to live up to the standards of decent political rule. This is no small feat. Could this be interpreted as a revolt against capitalism beyond frustrations with its unfair distributive outcomes both in terms of material resources and ideational (recognition) ones?

If there is a causal connection between the current protests and neoliberal rule, it might be this: Globally integrated capitalism, with its intense competitive pressures, thinning social safety net, and shrunken public sector, has impoverished many and trapped most – rich and poor, well-educated and low-skilled workers, men and women alike – in the ‘always-on economy’. It is this economic entrapment into an economically precarious busy-ness that drained society of radicalism as it made us focused on the short-term considerations of becoming employable and staying employed, often on more than one job, sapping up creative social energies, overpowering our sense of injustice with conservative cravings for stability. At the same time, the vastly varied distributive outcomes of neoliberal globalization refurbished the class struggle with new class enemies – the winners and losers of globalization. In such a context of generalized precarity and social animosity, whatever legitimacy the neoliberal policy framework had, it was drawn from the narrative that with their firm focus on the economy governments were ensuring prosperity through growth and competitiveness.

By altering the parameters of our everyday existence, the pandemic has created a radical departure from what was considered normal in three ways. First, the narrative that economic activity was the preeminent consideration and undisputed competency of the government evaporated overnight. Who would have guessed that capitalist countries would willingly shut down large sectors of the economy for a prolonged period? Second, the public health crisis and the difficulty the wealthy capitalist democracies experienced in coping with it

revealed the nature of these societies' affliction - it exposed precarity to be a social pathogen from which few were safe. Importantly, it brought to light the insidious process of massive precarization that had been at work for decades. It became clear that the great economic price our societies are paying for coping with the pandemic has much to do with long-standing failures of political rule – with the fact that self-serving political elites have long abandoned the precepts of accountable rule in the public interest. These elites resorted to facile autocratic measures (from ordering the lock-down to lifting it for the sake of rebooting the economy) which were more of a way to feign leadership without assuming responsibility – the responsibility to build public healthcare capacity and make it available to all, to shield science from the profit imperative, to make the economy work for all citizens and provide for life in dignity. Public authority responded to the massive social precarisation through disciplining rather than serving and nurturing society. Thus, the pandemic exposed the link between the political economy that generates precarity and an autocratic style of rule. Third, the contamination and the measures for fighting it affected most adversely the most fragile social groups, including globalization's 'losers' whose precarity had previously made them politically conservative (in search for stability.)<sup>14</sup> Thus, the circumstances of the pandemic both undermined the legitimacy of the neoliberal policy formula, radicalized the sense of social injustice amidst policy failure, and brought the purported class enemies into the events of a joint uprising. In the United States, the fact that communities of color had been disproportionately affected by the pandemic – itself an outcome of a systemic failure affecting society at large – provided the tangible grievance which a social revolt needs at its inception. At this background, the slogans “Defund the Police” and “Abolish the Police” that protesters raised in the summer of 2020 could be interpreted in two ways. They might be seen as a further slump into the neoliberal – as calls to cut the last remaining public service available to low-income neighborhoods. As it often happens, progressive forces are trapped in the very language of power they mean to fight. Proposals for cutting some funding from police departments and shifting it to social services seem to condone the neoliberal penchant of public authority to keep the public sector starved of funds and pitch one department against another in

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<sup>14</sup> Commenting on the episodes of aggression that occurred at some BLM protests, Alexandria Ocasio Cortez put it: “the idea that violent crime is somehow immune, or totally separated, from the economic situation that people are going through right now, I think that’s mistaken [...] It’s true, the desperation, even if we’re not talking about petty theft—there is a ladder that escalates into violent crime that is very much connected to the economic situation of a given community.” (quoted in Fenton, Nelsen and Campanile, 2020)

the fight for scarce resources. Regrettably, these protests are silent about the lack of public infrastructure that was needed to avoid the disaster of the pandemic – or this has been invoked only indirectly in the proposals for shifting funds away from policing. Moreover, with their main message being about police violence against black people (an identitarian issue), the protests might be falling into the paradox of emancipation. Far from being a challenge to capitalism, one could argue they are, rather, tailor-made to avoid challenging capitalism in any way.

However, we could see these uprisings as an attempt to exit from the metacrisis of capitalism through opening a path for a systemic overhaul -- a radical reform of the economy and political infrastructure of our societies that enables a socially responsible rule. The grounds for such a reading are two: the social forces the protests have united and the nature of the grievance they have expressed. As they evolved, the protests brought together two groups of people – the purported ‘winners’ (the economically affluent and culturally liberal urban ‘elites’) and the ‘losers’ – the impoverished, socially marginalized groups. This is a powerful multitude indeed – and every idea is only as strong as the social forces behind it. As to the idea behind which these forces mobilize – “Defund the Police”, could be read as a call for eliminating two of the pillars of precarity capitalism: an economy that breeds precarity and public authority that uses law enforcement as a tool for social integration. Indeed, the BLM protests linked the issue of police violence to the differential effects of the pandemic, bringing to light the way that socially irresponsible rule has left communities of color with inadequate medical care, employment, and insurance. However, this also exposed the deeper logic of a system that actively generates precarity for all and then distributes that precarity unequally. In the demands of the protestors, the “defunding” part of the police is the first step to removing the police’s dominion in many areas (drug crimes, domestic disputes, patrolling neighborhoods) by replacing the police with other public services that would eliminate the conditions for crime in the first place. This would amount to a systemic change indeed. The neoliberal undertones in the discourse of ‘defunding’ (eliminating a public service) are then a deliberate appropriation of the language of neoliberalism with the purpose of subverting capitalism from within by countering its ordering logics – in this case, the coupling between precarisation and oppression. If *Occupy* pointed out the system was rigged, the George Floyd protests are saying the system needs to be abolished.

Whatever reading we might want to adopt, these eruptions of pandemic radicalism sound a crucially urgent alarm: our political system contains no mechanism for making elites

effectively accountable for socially irresponsible rule. Democratic elections have proven to give voice to the fear of freedom that the political economy of precarity breeds. Thus, the democratic vote further entrenches a political focus on the short-term, in order to safeguard the dynamics of economic efficiency on which the majority's livelihoods have been made to depend. As a minimum, the George Floyd protests express a frustration with the failure of political democracy within a capitalist economy. Why wait for the democratic elections in two months if they are sure to reproduce a system reeking of injustice? But they could be something more – a disclosure of the true nature of contemporary capitalist democracies – trapped between a political economy that breeds massive precarity and a state that responds with oppression.

### **Conclusion: the Beirut of our futures**

Protesters in Lebanon blame entrenched government corruption and incompetence for the blast at the Beirut port that killed hundreds, injured thousands and devastated much of the capital. In Western democracies, the source of governance failure is not corruption and mismanagement, but a policy logic that puts profit before people, and uses the channels of democratic representation to entrench this policy logic into a socio-political system. The over-arching dynamics are the same: a socially irresponsible rule preparing a law-and-order style of political management, itself rooted in valid public demands for safety and security – demands caused by the precarity created by those very elites that are now imposing the order. The outcome is the same – societies in ruin.

Without a robust long-term investment in public welfare, without countering the competitive pressures of now globally integrated capitalism (by altering the nature of globalization), these pressures will keep fostering hostility within our societies as one group of victims of the system is pitched against another group of victims, while the political and economic establishment reaps the benefits of the economy of scale.

This applies more narrowly to coping with the coronavirus pandemic and future ones. Without a robust investment in healthcare – from science to preventive care and education, the social distancing measures that are generating mini civil wars of resentment and indignation, are no more than a neoliberal tactic of transferring social responsibility to citizens, and enforcing this with a combination of an iron fist and some redistributive measures which, even as they reduce the rampant inequalities, still leave society radically precarious. Enter autocratic neoliberalism, and what a wonderful life that is! We shall be singing opera at our balconies in a

gesture of neighborly love. We shall applaud our medics' valor at our front doors and open windows, say, every evening at 8pm. Our societies might even be more equal. But hardly any less miserable.

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A report published in the *Financial Times* in the aftermath of the Beirut explosion reads: "The fear remains that the system cannot overhaul itself. Sitting on a plastic chair, a cigarette hanging from this mouth, one shopkeeper doubted real reform would come. "Changing the government won't change anything," he said... "These same thieves will come back." (Cornish, 2020)

This shopkeeper might have been sitting amidst the debris in Seattle, Chicago, and Portland, discussing the forthcoming November presidential elections. When the democratic institutions prove too weak to overcome socially irresponsible rule, the persistent insurgency of the streets in the affluent capitalist democracies signals the end of an epoch. When Redistribution, Recognition and Representation fail to deliver decent politics, the time has come for systemic change. Capitalism has run its course.

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