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Albena Azmanova

The paradox of emancipation: Populism, democracy, and the soul of the Left

“There are three kinds of despots. There is the despot who tyrannises over the body. There is the despot who tyrannises over the soul. There is the despot who tyrannises over the soul and body alike. The first is called the Prince. The second is called the Pope. The third is called the People.”

Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (1891)

Abstract

What is the connection between the surge of populism and the deflation of electoral support to traditional left-leaning ideological positions? How can we explain the downfall of the Left in conditions that should be propelling it to power? In its reaction both to the neo-liberal hegemony and to the rise of populism, I claim that the Left is afflicted by what Nietzsche called ‘a democratic prejudice’ – the reflex of reading history as the advent of democracy and its crisis. As a result, the Left now undertakes to recover democracy by resurrecting the growth-and-redistribution policy set that was a trademark of the ‘golden age’ of social democracy in the three post-war decades. This nostalgic gesture, however, is leading the Left into another predicament, which I call the ‘paradox of emancipation’ – while fighting for equality and inclusion as essential conditions for democratic citizenship, the Left is validating the social order within which equality and inclusion are being sought – namely, order shaped by the competitive production of profit which is the root cause of our societies’ plight. The analysis concludes with a proposal for building a counterhegemony against neo-liberal capitalism by means of enlarging the Left’s focus beyond its traditional concerns with inequality and exclusion, to address also the injustice of growing social and economic insecurity – a harm whose reach surpasses the working poor. Reformulating an agenda of social justice around issues of economic insecurity that cross the ‘class divide’ would allow the Left to mobilize a broad coalition of social forces for radical and lasting change in the direction of socialist democracy.

Keywords

capitalism, domination, justice, neo-liberalism, populism, radical democracy, social democracy, socialism

1/ The Great Recession and the Downfall of the Left

“We are neither right nor left, we are coming from the bottom and going for the top” – thus the Spanish Indignados¹ phrased, in the summer of 2011, the anti-establishment upheaval that erupted in many western democracies amidst the latest economic crisis. That anger was directed at the ruling elites who had fallen guilty twice: first for creating the conditions for the 2008 financial meltdown, and then again for turning the financial crisis into a social one. For the past thirty years, they had administered

¹ ‘The Indignant’ were a protest movement mostly of young Spaniards who mobilized in the spring and summer of 2011 to protest high unemployment rates, welfare cuts and political corruption. Various sources report between 6.5 and 8 million participants.

on society a policy formula of unbridled capitalism: a concoction of financial deregulation, internationally open markets and domestically free economies. This produced a vertiginous accumulation of risks which eventually imploded into a financial fiasco. Incumbents responded to this with the infamous ‘austerity policy’ -- a mix of raising taxes and downsizing public spending for the sake of appeasing financial markets, which incurred a severe social and human cost. Industrial production plunged, unemployment rose, consumer spending plummeted and essential public services vanished. In the course of the decade that followed the financial collapse – a decade that came to be known as the Great Recession - the unemployment rate in some European regions rose to nearly 20 percent while the jobless youth rate became almost twice as high. The current recovery still feels to many like an economic depression. These were textbook conditions for the revival of socialism as a political project, for the rise and rise of the Left.

Yet, with a few exceptions, Left parties have not managed to harness the anti-establishment energies and channel them into leftist politics. Democratic elections in the ‘free world’ continue to fuel the far right and even propel it to power, as it happened in Italy, Austria, the United States and Brazil. The majority of the vote keeps going to the center-right, which is the biggest political family in Europe and remained so after the May 2019 elections.² More surprisingly still, this is happening not *despite*, but *through* the vote of those very groups that have historically supplied the core electoral basis of the Left – the overworked and underpaid working classes. How can we explain the downfall of the Left in conditions that should be lifting it to power? What is the connection between the surge of populism and the deflation of electoral support for traditional left-leaning ideological positions?

² At the 2009 and 2014 elections for the European Parliament, the center-right remained by far the biggest political family (comprising the economically liberal and culturally conservative *European People’s Party*, the economically and culturally liberal (neoliberal) *Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe* and the traditionalist *European Conservatives and Reformists*). The far-right (*Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy*, and *Europe of Nations of Freedoms*) more than doubled its numbers, while support for the Left (the center-left *Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats*, the radical left *European United Left-Nordic Greens*, and the *Greens-European Free Alliance*) remained largely unchanged. Surveys in the run-up to the May 2019 elections indicate a decline in electoral support for the Left and forecast the center-right to remain the biggest group in the European Union legislature. Tellingly, support is rising only for the two far-right political groups as well as for the free market ALDE (<https://europeelects.eu/ep2019/>).

The Left's current predicament has of course much to do with the far right's aptitude for responding to valid grievances about threatened livelihoods with the facile shortcuts of xenophobia – the easy efficiency of the 'politics of fear' (Azmanova 2004, 2011; Wodak 2015). Yet the political impotency of both the center-Left and radical Left cannot be blamed entirely on the Right's insolence and guile. Could there be something in the very nature of the Left's response that underlies the continuous attrition of electoral support? Uncharacteristically blunt, Jürgen Habermas has recently charged: "The reason for the decline of social democratic parties is their lack of profile. Nobody knows any longer what they're needed for." (Habermas 2018). Indeed, let us ask just that: What is the Left needed for?

In what follows, I will inspect the Left's attempts to respond to the rise of populism, in order to account for its persisting weakness in appealing to voters despite the renewed mobilization of leftist parties and movements. I conceptualize this weakness in terms of a phenomenon Friedrich Nietzsche called 'democratic prejudice' – the reflex of reading history as the advent of democracy and its crisis. The Left currently views the damage done by neoliberalism in terms of the erosion of democracy, as growing inequality has effectively disenfranchised many. It therefore endeavours to recover democracy by resurrecting the 'jobs, growth and redistribution' policy set that had been a trademark of the 'golden age' of Social Democracy in the three post-war decades. This nostalgic mind-set, I will argue, is preventing the Left from making an accurate diagnosis of the nature of the grievances fuelling the anti-establishment revolt and, consequently, from formulating an apposite political strategy. This, in turn, is leading the Left into another predicament I call the 'paradox of emancipation': while fighting for equality and inclusion as essential conditions for democratic citizenship, the Left is validating the social order within which equality and inclusion are being sought – that is, it endorses the dynamics of competitive production of profit that constitute capitalism as a social order. These dynamics, however, have been the root cause of our societies' plight under neoliberal capitalism – much more so than under previous historical forms of capitalism. Much as it is commendable that the Left is now trying to resurrect the familiar agenda of progressive politics for a fair distribution of life-chances, I will argue that it is failing to question the *nature* of the life-chances that are being distributed. It is this peculiarity of the current historical conjuncture that, I will suggest, should nourish the

Left's soul, inform its mind and shape its body politics – that is, enable it to overcome the nostalgia for the democratic capitalism of the last century and build a novel counter-hegemony against globally integrated capitalism.

My critique of the 'democratic prejudice' of the Left does not aim to challenge the validity of democracy as a normative ideal. I question the potency of the commitment to democracy as a political ideology in the current historical context – that is, its suitability as a framework for political mobilization against the harms incurred by neoliberal capitalism. This will allow me to adumbrate, in the last part of the analysis, a proposal for mounting a novel counter-hegemony by expanding the Left's focus beyond its traditional concerns with inequality and exclusion, to address also the injustice of widening social and economic insecurity – a harm whose reach surpasses the working poor. I will suggest that reformulating its agenda of social justice around issues of economic insecurity that span across the 'class divide' would allow the Left to mobilize a broad coalition of social forces for radical and lasting change.

2/ A Democratic Renaissance

How did the Left get to the state of political impotence from which it is now at pains to recover? The center Left and the radical Left have taken different roads to arrive at this point. For the center-Left, that was the path of partnering with the center-Right in crafting what Nancy Fraser (2017) has called a hegemonic 'progressive neoliberalism' – a consensus between the main political families on combining, on the one hand, free market capitalism and, on the other, the progressive agenda of the New Left for gender, sexual, racial and ethnic inclusion and equality, as well as environmental protection. In order to mainstream its agenda and secure a place for itself at the political wheel of national governments, part of the Left thus sold its socialist soul to capitalism, moving significantly to the right on economic and social policy. However, the combination of opening national economies to global trade and shrinking the social safety net domestically – a combination that characterized the political economy of progressive neoliberalism --eventually imperiled the livelihoods of the industrial working classes as many jobs moved abroad. The complicity of the center-Left in the neoliberal policy project thus alienated its typical supporters.

The radical Left, while resisting the Faustian bargain the center-Left had made, became afflicted by ‘left-wing melancholy’ – a term Walter Benjamin coined in 1931 to describe a particular state of mind of the anti-capitalist militant -- a state of grieving a dying ideal while altogether keeping a firm commitment to it (Benjamin, 1974[1931]).³ Visions of communism and socialism had suffered a series of historical defeats: the absent proletarian revolutions in the West, the discrediting of these ideals by the dictatorships in Eastern Europe, and the eventual collapse rather than liberalization of these regimes in 1989-1990. These defeats instilled in left intellectuals a sense of ardent but introverted anxiety, which gradually drained the radical Left of political agency. Since the project of socialism seemed to have entered a dead-end, activism was reduced to resistance and building resilience, at best. Together, the unbearable lightness of centrist neoliberalism the endurable load of left-wing melancholia hampered the Left’s capacity to respond promptly to the rise of social discontent throughout the Great Recession.

The recent eruption of populism, however, has broken the spell of the neoliberal hegemony; it has opened a new space for political conflict and creativity, through a renewed contest among political ideologies, and with that – the opportunity for the construction of a new political order (Azmanova 2018, Mouffe 2018). The revival of left politics is effectively taking place – most abruptly visible with the upsurge of democratic socialism in the US that began with the overwhelming support of young voters for Bernie Sanders during the presidential primaries in 2016. The Women’s March that took place on January 21st 2017 in protest against Donald Trump’s inauguration as U.S. President was reportedly the largest single-day political demonstration U.S. history. It seemed to have awoken the Left from its solipsistic posture of passive mourning.

Recently, during parliamentary elections in Europe, as well as in the October 2018 mid-term elections in the United States, the Left has been eager to reconnect to its voters by castigating economic inequalities and advancing pragmatic proposals on broadly shared concerns: from affordable health care and keeping down the costs of prescription drugs and college tuition (the Democratic Party platform in the U.S) to

³ For a discussion of the concept and its historical iterations see Brown (1999), Traverso (2017) and Gordon (2017).

building affordable housing and keeping children free from poverty (the SPD platform in Germany). Thus, the center-Left's break with neoliberalism and the radical Left's recovery from political melancholia are taking place as an effort to reclaim the achievements of the 'golden age' of democratic capitalism from before the onset of neoliberalism – the time of the Welfare State, with its capital-labor class conflicts and reconciliations as well as its growth-and-redistribution accommodations.⁴

Significantly, this incipient revival of the Left is taking place not within an explicit narrative of a return to the olden days of Social Democracy, even if the policy formulas are straight from that classical arsenal. The overarching narrative of political mobilization is now, instead, that of saving, recovering, or radicalizing *democracy*. While social justice issues typical for the Left had been taken out of the realm of political conflict under the neoliberal consensus, they are now re-emerging, and are becoming politicized through the discourse of damages to democracy. The 'catch-all' imagery of democracy is to serve the strategic goal of maintaining a broad public appeal -- to show voters, as Democratic party leader Nancy Pelosi put it, that Democrats are "a governing party, not the leftist mob that Mr. Trump has described".⁵ The nebulous, allegedly non-ideological (and arrogant) expression 'progressive politics' has become the common term that the Left uses in self-identification, replacing the explicit earlier reference to anti-capitalism or socialism. I will continue using the term, even as I object to its hubris (as it implies that those who disagree with us are reactionary), because it has gained currency in contemporary political discourse, but I will subvert what we mean by 'progress'.

⁴ It is yet unclear whether the Green New Deal resolution which the left wing of the Democratic Party introduced to Congress on 7 February 2018 signals (1) a novel synergy between the social justice and the environmental justice agendas, which could effectively recruit broad support, (2) the subordination of the former to the latter, which might alienate the working classes, or (3) masking a radical socialist agenda as concerns for environmental emergencies, which is unlikely to secure the broad appeal it seeks. The European Socialists are running on a similar platform at the May 2019 European Parliament elections, but surveys of the aggregative voting behavior (the "popular vote") reveal that, since the beginning of active electoral mobilization in October 2018, support for the center-right parties has increased, it has dropped for the center-Left, and has remained flat for the radical left (European election survey of 18 Feb.2019 at <https://europeelects.eu/ep2019/>)

⁵ Quoted in Fandos (2018).

There are distinct gains from adopting democracy, rather than socialism, as a narrative in political mobilization. Democracy as a moral platform of equality and inclusion supplies the precious faith-like certitude of being on the right side of history: it is giving the Left back its soul. Moreover, the implementation of political democracy by establishing a truly universal franchise is a matter of real urgency in the United States, where Republicans, through gerrymandering and voter suppression, are preventing majority preferences from entering politics. The colonization of politics by big money in the United States, as well as to some extent in Europe, is the gravest barrier to the representation of the popular will, because the preferences of economic actors who are bankrolling politics invariably trump the preferences of ordinary voters.⁶

And yet, I will claim that the Left's adoption of radical democracy as its overarching political ideology is not only unlikely to deliver the aspired prize of electoral victories, but is also antithetical to the very goal the Left has set for itself: to significantly reduce social injustice.

3/ Democracy as a rhetorical common place

Let me begin elaborating this claim by addressing the most innocuous danger. The reformulation of left politics as the radicalization of democracy is ineffective because this claim is being made by a variety of political actors, while the term 'democracy' has been drained of its original affinity with anti-capitalism.

About a century ago, democracy was still a daring political project. While the term democracy had been almost absent from the language of the American and French revolutions of the eighteenth century, by the time the 1848 revolutions in Europe erupted, it had acquired a decidedly radical ring to it: democracy was believed to be "the certain and rapid prelude to 'socialism'" (Hobsbawm 1975:15). However, Eric Hobsbawm reminds us, by the end of the nineteenth century the rulers of Europe

⁶ According to the widely discussed study by Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, "economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence" (Gilens and Page, 2014: 564).

and the United States had come to the conclusion that democracy was inevitable; that “it would probably be a nuisance but politically harmless” (ibid). Deprived of its radical connotation as a threat to capitalism, within another century the term ‘democracy’ has become a catch-all phrase for more or less decent politics.

What makes the term ‘democracy’ so pliable as a tool of political mobilization is that it is a rhetorical common-place, that is, a unit of broadly shared knowledge without fixed content. Importantly, the notion has travelled quite a distance from its original connotation of ‘mob rule’ to become a vague term with a strongly positive connotation. This renders it attractive to a wide range of political positions. Tellingly, one of the first political forces in modern history to adopt the label ‘democracy’ for itself was a conservative faction within the French National Assembly of 1789 – the *Monarchiens* who called themselves “Democratic Royalists”.⁷ Nowadays, *Europe of Freedom and Democracy* is the name of one of the two Eurosceptic and xenophobic political groups in the European Parliament, which has as its members the likes of the Sweden Democrats – a party with roots in fascism. Right-wing formations from around the world congregate in the *Centrist Democrat International* and the *International Democrat Union*.

Not long ago, the neoliberal theology of the Third Way aspired to overcome the limitations of the left and right political alternatives through the mantra of achieving prosperity for all via open and free markets. This theology is now being rapidly replaced by a cross-ideological veneration of democracy. The mainstream political families condemn populism as an assault on our cosmopolitan, pluralistic, multiracial democracy. They invoke memories of a purportedly well-functioning democracy and warn that Trump, his European counter-parts and their supporters will demolish that order and create a new one based on white racial authoritarianism and plain plutocracy. On the other side of the barricades, the likes of Hungarian premier Victor Orban are proudly adopting the label ‘illiberal democracy’. While populist leaders used a discourse of fear when building up their movements and rising to power, they are currently using a discourse of democracy to consolidate their

⁷ The name Democratic Royalists aspired to capture the idea of combining the rights of royal authority with those of the common man. The official adoption of the label ‘democracy’ at the time was curious because the term was largely absent from the rhetoric of the French revolution. Between 1789 and 1796, none of the numerous revolutionary newspapers and journals used “democracy” or “democratic” in their name (Rosanvallon 2009:541).

positions and stabilize their hold on power. They charge that democracy has been usurped by wealthy elites through the very institutions of representative government that are supposed to safeguard democracy. Anti-EU populists (but also many of us in academia) depict EU institutions as part of a self-serving, corrupt elite that ignores the will of the people; they are vouching to cure the infamous ‘deficit of democracy’ by transferring more decision-making power down to national parliaments.⁸ This is in line with a long-standing neoliberal stratagem: neoliberal elites across the political spectrum have been vetting the policies through which they transferred social responsibility from the state to society with the discourse of strengthening local democracy. Thus, they have been usurping power through the supranational while shifting responsibility to the local. Optimists who count on the wisdom of national and local democracies to fight neoliberalism might do well to remember that the set of policies that launched global neoliberal capitalism were coined by two of the most mature national democracies (the U.S. under Ronald Reagan and the U.K. under Margaret Thatcher)

Not only political leaders, but also public administrations and civil society actors themselves are eagerly running to the rescue of democracy. The City Hall in New York acquired a new *Democracy NYC* office in October 2018.⁹ ‘Democracy drinks’ are organized monthly by the Brussels’ *Defenders of Democracy*, a community of civil service professionals (from those very EU institutions charged with a ‘democracy deficit’) who organize events intended “to grow and support a larger community of democracy defenders and freedom loving people,” in their own words.¹⁰

If democracy were just a rhetorical commonplace with a powerful normative charge that can be deployed in the pursuit of almost any political project, the Left

⁸ See Chalmers et al. 2016. The European Left has been mobilizing for the 2019 European Elections behind the “Manifesto for the Democratization of Europe – so called “Piketty Plan” – which includes a Democratization Treaty for Europe. My solution to the problem favours enhancing political accountability and exercising pressure for altering the nature of policy (Azmanova 2013). I am skeptical that national parliaments would necessarily stand against neoliberal economic policy under pressures for keeping their national economies competitive in the globally integrated markets.

⁹ It is headed by a democracy officer (currently Ayirini Fonseca-Sabune) on a salary of \$165,000-a-year (reported in Neuman 2018).

¹⁰ Defending Democracy website -- <https://defending-democracy.org/community/democracy-drinks/>

might indeed be wise to take advantage of it. However, it is more than that. ‘Democracy’, in the way the term is currently used, has the features of what Michael Tigar has described as *political mythologies*: “structures of words and images that portray people, institutions, and events in ways that *mask an underlying reality*” (Tigar 2018: 1.60, italics added). If this is indeed the case – if the discourse of democracy is masking a reality of noxious power dynamics, the Left’s adoption of democracy as ideology would entail narrowing the horizon of critique and the ambitions of criticism. Let us examine this hypothesis.

4/ The ‘Democratic Prejudice’

The growing number of self-appointed saviors of democracy might indeed be a reason for concern. Plato’s observation that one could detect the poor health of a community by the number of its lawyers and medical doctors springs to mind – the more of them there are, the sicker a society is (Plato, 1968 [380BC]: 84). The more democrats it begets, the sicker our democracy gets. This circularity is not frivolous. It has something to do with the relationship between democracy *as a form of society* and democracy *as a political regime*. It will be necessary to examine this relationship in order to discern the reality of the power dynamics that democracy-as-ideology accommodates.

As currently used in the political rhetoric of the Left, democracy is endorsed both as the *goal* as well as the *tool* of obtaining that goal: the democratic *society* (one marked by inclusion as well as maximum equality and liberty for all -- or ‘equaliberty’ in Etienne Balibar’s apt formulation) is to be obtained through the mechanisms of political democracy – that is, through the mechanisms of collective decision-making, such as local councils, deliberative fora, and parliaments. Importantly, to the extent that political democracy is understood as effective *equality of citizenship* (rather than just as formal-legal equality), the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of democratic membership are all essential commitments in the mobilization of the Left. Social justice, obtained through wealth redistribution and job creation, is seen as a prerequisite for inclusive and equal (ergo, democratic) citizenship.

The idea of socialism, however, implies an alternative understanding of democracy – it is a qualitatively different form of society, not just a matter of a quantitatively equal distribution of power among all members (democratic citizenship). The idea of socialism, as Axel Honneth reminds us, was conceived as a project of subjecting economic activities to the greater social will; a socialist society secures not so much equality as it brings economic processes under the control of the broader society and to the service of it (Honneth, 2016:9-10). Karl Polanyi’s discussion of socialism is helpful in elucidating the understanding of democracy as a form of society in which social justice is more than a matter of equal distribution of power. Polanyi defines social justice (one of the tenets of socialism) as meeting the needs of the entire society.¹¹ In his account, social priorities concern the distribution of labor and goods, but above all the direction of production in line with higher social use value, as opposed to individual consumer preferences (Polanyi, 2016[1922]: 388).

Can democracy as a form of society, thus understood, be achieved with the mechanisms of democracy as a political system and as a political ideology? Marx’s misgivings about the emancipatory potentials of liberal democracy are well known (the legal equality of citizens in capitalist societies masks their social inequalities and thus enables the oppression of labor by capital). To this we can object, with E.P. Thompson, that even as the *content* of bourgeois law is oppressive, the idea of the rule of law is emancipatory and therefore of service to humanity: “the rule of law itself, the imposing of effective inhibitions upon power and the defense of the citizen from power’s all-intrusive claims [is] an unqualified human good” (Thompson 1975:266). It is the democratic nature of the rule of law -- its general and equal application within the bounds of a political community, that ensures this emancipatory effect.

When I speak of the perils of democracy as a political ideology confined to equality of citizenship, I do not have in mind the Marxian critique of the bourgeois nature of political liberalism, but rather a phenomenon Friedrich Nietzsche called the “democratic prejudice of the moderns”. He observed that when we perceive the past through the egalitarian and progressive historiographical self-congratulatory conceits of the present, we fail to understand other schemes of values and we miss the chance

¹¹ The second tenet of socialism, in Polanyi’s account, is maximum productivity, defined as maximizing the number of goods at minimal labor effort (Polanyi 2016[1922]: 388).

to understand and reflect on ourselves through them (Nietzsche, 1967[1887]: 28). Following Nietzsche, Wendy Brown warns that democratic prejudice makes us bad readers of the past and hampers our capacity to shed light on the workings of power (Brown, 2014: 110).¹² Brown's interpretation of the 'democratic prejudice' in terms of the constraints it imposes on the analysis of specific historical circumstances and the dynamics of power undergirding these circumstances is particularly germane to the current analysis. How does the democratic prejudice play out in the current historical conjunction?

The Left's renewed mobilization, we noted, now takes place within a tale of the advancement, crisis, and urgent revival of democracy. Modernity, as this tale goes, has developed as the culmination of democracy in the affluent and pluralistic Western societies after WWII, when the edifice of the Welfare State came to combine the universal electoral franchise with social and economic rights. The onset of neoliberalism in the late twentieth century eroded the felicitous model of democratic capitalism; the goal is, therefore, to heal democracy by resurrecting the policies of inclusion and equality that marked the heyday of the Welfare State. Thus, the political mobilization and ideological recovery of the Left is taking place on the terrain of democracy as *historiography*, as a *normative horizon*, and as a *strategy* for getting there.

The democratic prejudice is now impairing the Left in two ways – I will proceed to discuss them as 'Welfare State nostalgia' and 'Kantian moral optimism'. First, the noxious effects of neoliberalism are being posited against the achievements of the affluent and pluralistic post-WWII welfare state which is often portrayed as the golden age of American and European democracy, much of which is credited to the leadership of the Left (Social Democratic and Socialist parties in Europe and the Democrats in the United States). This self-congratulatory idealization of the achievements of the welfare state is making the Left oblivious to the negative features of that format of democratic capitalism -- from intensified consumerism to the privileging of labor-market insiders – features that have been subjected to poignant critique by left-leaning intellectuals.¹³ The material affluence and relative material

¹² I am indebted to Azar Dakwar for an insightful discussion of the origins and applications of the notion of 'democratic prejudice'.

¹³ Within the Frankfurt School critique of late capitalism, the most notable works in this regard are Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) and Habermas' *Legitimation Crisis* (1973). Michel

equality that are currently the object of left nostalgia, came at the price of heavy bureaucratic control, waste of resources through economic mismanagement, as well as considerable damage to the natural environment that the dynamics of intensified production and consumption entailed. As Chantal Mouffe recently remarked, because many of the social-democratic achievements have been eroded during the neoliberal hegemony, ‘we find ourselves in the paradoxical situation of having to defend various welfare state institutions that we criticized earlier for not being radical enough’ (Mouffe 2018, 1.455).

The contrast ‘progressive’ forces now draw between, on the one hand, the democratic capitalism of the Welfare State and on the other, neoliberalism, is misleading. The cross-ideological policy consensus that enabled the Welfare State was activated by a policy mix of stimulating demand and consumption to spur job creation and production, and thus provide resources for wealth distribution. This productivist policy formula was not entirely eliminated by the neoliberal policy shift of the late twentieth century, it was sublimated by it. Let me explain. Neoliberalism inherited from the welfare state a policy formula prioritizing production and job creation, but added to it free trade – global market integration. This allowed jobs (and thus sources of livelihood) to leave the domestic economies and relocate abroad. This in no way changed the productivist nature of the political economy of western societies, while it hampered the life-chances of many workers, especially as the resources for redistribution thinned out with the possibility of companies relocating abroad in search of lower taxation. The neoliberal state also inherited the redistributive know-how of the welfare state, but deployed it differently – to redistribute resources from the losers to the winners of globalisation, thus aggregating the risks and opportunities to specific social groups, rather than spreading them equitably (Azmanova, 2014).¹⁴ In this sense, the contrast now drawn between neoliberalism and the golden days of democracy (under the mature Welfare State of the 1970s, when redistribution, recognition and representation achieved considerable

Foucault’s criticism of the deeply oppressive nature of ‘neoliberalism’ in his *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978/79) was directed at the model of post- WWII collectivist and state-managed capitalism that many democrats now sanctify.

¹⁴ Due to this peculiarity of the institutionalized allocation of life-chances, I have called the latest state of capitalism ‘aggregative capitalism’, timing the switch from neoliberal to aggregative capitalism with governments’ making the national competitiveness in the global economy a top policy priority, sometime in the very early 21st century (Azmanova 2014).

equality and inclusion) is deceitful. It obscures an important continuum between the two phases of capitalism – a continuum based on a jobs-and-growth policy formula which is now forcing the Left to make a hard choice between environmental justice and social justice.

If the Welfare State nostalgia is the first way in which the ‘democratic prejudice’ is hampering the Left, the second way is the Kantian moral optimism that permeates the Left’s faith in the capacity of democracy as a political regime to give birth to democracy as a form of society. In his writings on moral philosophy, Kant argued that we can never establish with theoretical certainty that we have free will. Therefore, he held, it is up to us to endorse the *faith* that we are free: that we can be moved by moral reasons, assert our autonomy, and fulfill the demands of morality. At the same time, however, in his political writings, Kant advised that, in matters political, we should not rely on assumptions about the moral properties of individuals (Kant 1903 [1795]:154-155).¹⁵ In violation of Kant’s cautioning, political activism on the Left is affected by Kantian moral optimism regarding politics, especially when it comes to democracy as a political system. A faith in the moral and cognitive capacities of citizens engaged in collective self-determination permeates contemporary democratic theory and the political mobilization of the Left. A procedurally perfect political democracy (one free from the direct impact of power and money, where power inequalities among citizens are erased) is entrusted to deliver a democratic society. If only we had a procedurally perfect democracy to translate the popular will, uninhibited, into politics!

We can maintain this democratic optimism only by ignoring the insights of much of contemporary social and political theory. We must ignore, for instance, the observations of neo-institutionalism and social constructivism regarding the nature of individual preferences – actors’ preferences, their perceptions of interest, are endogenous to the institutions and social practices through which people are socialized; all rationality is socially embedded rationality. Even as the complex and fragmented nature of the social totality (as being composed of diverse practices and processes of socialization) allows for individuals’ relative autonomy, one cannot safely assume that even the most perfect process of collective decision-making would

¹⁵ Tellingly, ‘despotic democracy’ is one of the ideal types of political regimes in the taxonomy Kant elaborates in *Perpetual Peace*. He puts his trust in republicanism as a political formula that combines a democratic forms of sovereignty with liberal style of the exercise of power (see Azmanova 2013).

be impervious to the prevalent dynamics of socialization. In other words, if we take the concept of praxis seriously —i.e. of a historically and socially situated human agency, we cannot but take into account that subjectivities are formed through socialization within a social order and therefore subjects are *affected* (and not just *infected*) by the constitutive dynamics of that social order.

In this vein, if we understand capitalism as an institutionalized social order (and not simply a market economy), we must admit that the logic of capitalist accumulation is not just an economic logic, but also a social one. As a social logic, it therefore permeates the subjects who are casting their political choices while enacting their collective sovereignty. The lifeworld these subjects inhabit is not simply colonized by the rationality of capitalist efficiency that drives the competitive production of profit. That logic supplies social actors with reasons valid from the point of view of those social subjectivities. (Of course, like Jürgen Habermas, we can reason otherwise and find a felicitous way out, but that would be to give in to the fallacy of Kantian moral optimism while betraying Kant's political realism – discussed above).

Representative, direct, and participative forms of capitalist democracy, even at their perfect maturity, are all enacted by individuals whose life-chances are dependent on their successful socialization within capitalism as a social order. This means that the institutional paraphernalia of democracy as a political regime alone is insufficient to obtain democracy as a form of emancipated society – that is, a society free of the productivist imperatives of the pursuit of profit. At best, political democracy can obtain equal and inclusive capitalism (indeed, this is what the populist insurrections demand) through policies of redistribution and recognition. Nevertheless, democratic capitalism will still be committed to the productivist dynamic of growth, as well as the competitive pursuit of profit that are so injurious to human beings, communities and nature. The tensions between democracy and capitalism have been a permanent source of emancipatory energies, but more often than not the imperative of competitive production of profit has dampened democracy's most radical aspirations – those going beyond the quest for equality and inclusion within an affluent society.

The Left should, therefore, revisit the question of the relationship between democracy as a political regime and democracy as a form of society in order not to

over-burden political democracy with tasks it cannot deliver. Here Karl Polanyi and Rosa Luxemburg offer relevant insights.

Rosa Luxemburg problematizes the relationship between political democracy and social progress in the following way. On the one hand, she is an unwavering adept of political democracy. Criticizing the nascent autocratic socialism after the October Revolution in Russia, Luxemburg urges: “Socialist democracy is not something which begins only in the promised land after the foundations of socialist economy are created... [it] begins simultaneously with the beginnings of the destruction of class rule and of the construction of socialism” (Luxemburg, 1918a:308). However, she mistrusted the mechanisms of electoral democracy, even with a fully expanded franchise, to do the work of radical social reform.¹⁶ It is worth reproducing her caustic depiction of the hopes and fears of giving electoral power to the working class in the run-up to the Weimar National Assembly of 1919-1920, because the sentiments which are the object of her sarcasm are also prevalent among the Left today:

“[T]he various social classes will come together, engage in a pleasant, calm and ‘dignified’ discussion with each other, and will afterwards hold a vote, perhaps even one with a famous ‘division’. When the capitalist class sees that it is in the minority, it, as a well-disciplined parliamentary party, will declare with a sigh, There’s nothing we can do! We see that we are outvoted. All right, we shall submit and hand over all our lands, factories, mines, all our fire-proof safes and our handsome profits to the workers” (Luxemburg, 1918c).

The mechanisms of democratic representation, even when fully developed, can be a tool for *democratizing* the social order, but not for the radical *transformation of the nature* of that order. Karl Polanyi elucidates the internal limitations of political democracy in this regard. In discussing socialism as a form of society that prioritizes social needs over consumer satisfaction, he notes that meeting the needs of society incurs costs, which he refers to as ‘social costs’, alongside the technical costs of production (‘natural costs’). He notes that capitalism cannot give priority to social

¹⁶ Like Marx, she considered electoral democracy to be an “outmoded legacy of bourgeois revolutions, an empty shell, a requisite from the time of petit-bourgeois illusions of a ‘united people’ and of the ‘liberty, equality, fraternity’ of the bourgeois State” (Luxemburg, 1918c:264).

justice or community aims because it is devoted to capital accumulation and driven by the profit motive: paying the social costs jeopardizes the profit motive. Only after the foundations of socialism as a form of society are established, Polanyi concludes, can social priorities be determined democratically by every member of society (Polanyi, 2016[1922]:388). Indeed, the most celebrated achievement of the Welfare State – the democratization of affluence, was achieved through institutionalized intensification of production and private consumption.

Polanyi's elaboration of social justice sheds light on the deficiency of the now prevalent agenda of the Left. In his account, social justice is not a matter of equal distribution of resources and social status among citizens, nor is it to be understood in quantitative, arithmetic terms of equalization of power relations. Social justice (and the truly democratic society) is to be understood qualitatively – as meeting the needs of the entire society (i.e. of access to education, clean environment, healthcare, leisure). It is in this sense that a socialist society is democratic in its very nature. The equalization of power relations is not a means for achieving social justice; this equalization is a natural outcome of a democratic society in which social relations are constituted through practices serving the satisfaction of the long-term societal interests rather than the accumulation and distribution of wealth or satisfying the short-term consumer preferences of all citizens.

In this sense, 'democratic capitalism' is an oxymoron: the goals of a democratic society -- one committed to collective goals -- are by definition incompatible with capitalism's constitutive dynamic (and ergo, key interest) – the perpetuation of capital accumulation. A capitalist society can accommodate a democratic political system only to the extent that this political system does not challenge in any radical way capitalism's constitutive dynamic. That is why democratic capitalism (as a socio-political order) cannot conceive of social justice as anything other than equality of wealth and decent working conditions in the generation of wealth. Within capitalism as a social order, social justice can therefore only be perceived in productivist terms -- as fairness in the production, redistribution, and consumption of wealth. It is little wonder that both the center-right and the far-right have recently voiced calls for social rights and redistribution (as inequality threatens consumptions -- one of the engines of the economy). The creation of the

European Pillar of Social Rights (as part of the European Union’s key policy commitments) in 2017 was an initiative of the center-right. None other than Christine Lagarde, the IMF’s Managing Director and Chairwoman, has been urging global leaders to fight inequality through redistribution in order to stabilize the economy and quell populism (Lagarde 2017). The Right is reviving its pre-neoliberal, productivist, worker-ist (ouvrierist) mantra of alleviating the burden on businesses for the sake of job creation. Thus, in a recent treatise on making America great again through the renewal of work, Oren Cass, one of the ideologists of the Republican Party, spouts the ideas of employer-worker partnerships in creating “a labor market in which workers can create and support strong families and communities”, in Mitt Romney’s praise on the book jacket (Cass 2018).¹⁷

While erecting the edifice of the Welfare State in the course of the twentieth century, the Left gradually came to abandon the original qualitative notion of a democratic society (socialism) and adopt a quantitative understanding of democracy – as equality of citizenship within a capitalist society. This version of democracy is not only perfectly compatible with the dynamics of competitive profit production, but is dependent on it – we need to grow the pie in order to distribute it – with all the attendant dynamics of exploitation, alienation, and destruction of nature.

The quantitative vision of democracy is well obtainable with the mechanisms of political democracy – that is, as long as we assume that the majority’s preferences would support the equalization of power relations, which is far from certain. As the authors of the ‘oligarchy’ study I discussed earlier remark, were the U.S. electoral system to translate the views of average Americans correctly into policy, that policy would be much less liberal and inclusive on cultural and moral issues (Kapur, 2014). Recent studies disclose that despite openly espousing democracy, many Americans are willing to tolerate the violation of democratic values, especially if this is to gain advantage for their demographic group (Graham and Svobik, 2018; Carey et al. 2018). This means that perfecting the institutional machinery of democratic representation (i.e. by eliminating the influence of money), much as this is of value on its own, is

¹⁷ Oren Cass was domestic issues director for Mitt Romney’s 2012 presidential campaign and a writer for the Conservative *National Review*.

unlikely to deliver a more democratic society, in the sense of democracy discussed above.

To sum up the argument so far: there is a significant difference between a quantitative (capitalist) and qualitative (socialist) understanding of democracy and social justice. According to the former, democracy is a matter of equal and inclusive citizenship, which is in turn obtainable via redistribution, recognition and representation. According to the latter, democracy is a social order that gives priority to the needs of the entire society. Since the 1970s, the Left has been committed to the quantitative notion of democracy, and is now reactivating it in its fight against the ascent of right-wing populism. Of course, the mechanisms of political democracy can be effectively deployed to increase equality and inclusion within the existing system of (capitalist) social relations thereby achieving democratic citizenship. This is a worthy goal. However, the Left cannot rely on these mechanisms to obtain radical social reform – this requires a different trajectory of mobilization. Subsuming the fight for socialism into a fight for ‘radical democracy’ (for full equality and inclusion within a capitalist social order) is to renounce the aspirations of social justice understood as meeting the needs of the entire society. It is our ‘democratic prejudice’ that prompts us to charge democracy as a political regime with the inherently impossible task of social transformation towards a democratic society – a society free from the dynamics of the pursuit of profit on which livelihoods depend.

We can go a step further in this direction and note the neoliberal nature of adopting democracy as a political ideology. On one hand, democracy as a political regime is perfectly compatible with the neoliberal policy goals of pursuing *national* economic competitiveness in the global economy. Enhancing the competitiveness of national economies (presented as a ‘common interest’) intensifies the process of capital accumulation. For national economies to be competitive, labor markets need to remain flexible, and productivity must be kept high while remuneration and consumption are suppressed. On the other hand, tasking political democracy with delivering social and environmental justice aligns perfectly with the neoliberal ruse of off-loading on society and individuals a burden impossible for them to carry – such as to go against their interest in harming the environment while their livelihoods depend on jobs that do the harming. As enlightened democrats, citizens are called upon to

willingly foot the bill for costly environmental protection which quasi all Left parties have adopted as a policy priority, while pension funds remain invested in those multinational corporations that are doing the pollution. This neoliberal nature of the over-reliance on democracy is the most bitter irony for social democrats who are democrats first and socialists second. Subsuming a socialist agenda under an agenda for radical democracy (of maximum equality and inclusion) does not undermine the neoliberal hegemony, it strengthens it.

5/ The Emancipation Paradox

The democratic prejudice is also preventing a trenchant analysis of contemporary capitalism and the potentialities for emancipation available within it. This incapacity for fresh scrutiny of capitalism is in turn rooted in the Left's penchant to discern injustices and seek remedies for them by borrowing the analytical matrix of Social Democracy from the heyday of the Welfare State. Within that matrix, social injustice was perceived in terms of inequalities and exclusion; political mobilization was aimed at economic redistribution, cultural recognition and political representation. In order to identify what is deficient in this manner of perceiving social justice politically, I propose to use a formula drawn from the following rendition of a Marxian analysis of capitalism.¹⁸

Marx saw capitalism as a social order, a system of social relations shaped by the overarching dynamics of primitive accumulation and competitive pursuit of profit. In turn, this social system is structured by key institutions, such as the market as a place of commodity exchange, and that of the private property of the means of production.¹⁹ In the course of the functioning of capitalism as a social system, experiences of injustice emerge along three trajectories of domination:

¹⁸ For an earlier articulation of these three patterns of injustice see Azmanova 2016 and 2018b.

¹⁹ Marx's notion of a social system is decidedly different from the one developed within structural-functionalism. For Marx, the system is not a unity of functionally differentiate spheres of action but a sphere of structured social relations – that is, of institutionalized human practices. In his *Legitimation Crisis* Habermas 'translates' the Marxian notion of social system into the format of structural functionalism (see Azmanova 2019b).

Structural domination concerns the way the main structures of the social system (the institutions that structure the social relations) affect participants' life-chances. In the case of capitalism, within the original Marxian analysis, the class structure pivots on the institution of the private property of productive assets. This is what allows the exploitation of labor, as it gives owners the capacity to extract surplus value from wage labor.

Relational domination consists in the subordination of one group of actors to another due to power asymmetries – asymmetries resulting from the unequal distribution of society's material or ideational resources (e.g. wealth, knowledge, recognition). Typical forms of injustice on the plane of relational domination are inequalities and exclusion. These types of injustice are fought through strategies of redistribution and inclusion. Returning to workers a bigger share of the value they produce (in the form of higher wages or other benefits) would alleviate relational injustice as it would reduce exploitation, but it would not terminate exploitation and, therefore, would not counter structural domination.

Systemic domination concerns the subordination of all members of society to the operational logic of capitalism – the competitive production of profit (or 'capital accumulation' in Marxian terms). As this the constitutive dynamic of capitalism, all participants in this process are subjected to it, including those who escape structural and relational domination (the owners of productive assets and the well-paid labor-market insiders). Marx introduced this trajectory of domination in his analysis of alienation (the multi-faceted estrangement of people from their humanity, their 'species-essence') that is incurred by the dynamics of profit-production. While Marx was explicitly concerned with the alienation of wage labor, there is no reason to confine the alienating effects of capital accumulation only to wage labor. The typical forms of social injustice incurred by systemic domination are the destruction of the natural environment and the damage to mental health and work-life balance. These harms are caused by individuals' participation in the competitive production of profit irrespective of one's particular position within the class divide.

The achievements of the Left throughout the twentieth century took place along the path of fighting structural and relational domination: power asymmetries were diminished via redistribution of material resources, while exclusion was ended

through battles for civil and cultural rights. The nationalization of productive assets reduced the spaces of exploitation. This broad agenda of justice secured the conditions for democratic citizenship, understood as equal and inclusive membership of a community. It is through these accomplishments that the ‘golden age of democracy’ in the late twentieth century was achieved.

It is, of course, commendable that the Left is now trying to resurrect this familiar agenda of progressive politics. However, this limits the political aspirations of the Left unduly to matters of structural and relational domination (matters regarding the distribution of life-chances). Outside the radar of critique remain concerns regarding the *nature* of the life-chances that are being distributed. We need to ask: what is the model of life within which equality and inclusion are being sought? Surely, neither the agenda of growth and redistribution (which austerity policy wiped out), nor policies of inclusion and recognition seriously threaten the dynamics of capital accumulation and the damage it is doing to the natural environment, human communities, and individuals.

In confining the political revival of the Left to a renewed battle for equality and inclusion, the danger is not just in unduly *limiting* the agenda of progressive politics. There is the risk of inadvertently going against the very goals of building democracy as an emancipated society that the Left has explicitly set for itself. I will formulate this scenario as the *paradox of emancipation*. The paradox consists in this: struggles against relational and structural domination via efforts at increasing equality and inclusion tend to validate and increase the desirability of the model within which equality and inclusion are being sought. In this way, political activism not only overlooks issues of systemic domination, but accepts it for the sake of reducing structural and relational domination. For example, as I have discussed elsewhere, while the second generation of feminists fought for inclusion in the labor market on equal terms with men, they not only failed to question the desirability of labor commodification, but added additional valiance to it: thus, their empowerment was a surrender to the dynamics of competitive profit production (Azmanova 2016). In order to avoid getting entrapped in the paradox of emancipation, the Left should seek to formulate its agenda as a struggle above all against systemic domination – that is, against social harms produced by the competitive production of profit. However, the

‘democratic prejudice,’ with its nostalgic longing for the pre-neoliberal times of the Welfare State, is an obstacle to this. Let me address this problem in some detail.

As I have noted, leftist political and intellectual forces tend to view the socio-political context of neoliberal capitalism through the lens of relational and structural injustice – a matrix shaped by the struggles of the ‘old Left’ (the class struggle agenda) and the New Left (civil, political and cultural rights).²⁰ The grievances voiced by the populist movements thus tend to be interpreted, respectively, either in terms of threat to identity (white male privilege) or as impoverishment and rising inequality. To fight populism, the Left typically now prescribes redistribution (raising the minimum wage, introducing basic income) as well as investment in public services – policy solutions which the far right has also demanded and to which the center-right in many countries also subscribes. However, this imposes a format of analysis that leaves important peculiarities of neoliberal capitalism outside of the remit of critique and criticism. This format of analysis obscures the *differentia specifica* of neoliberal capitalism. This prevents the Left from building a platform for its renewal that befits the current historical circumstances. What are the distinctive features of contemporary capitalism?

Neoliberal capitalism began to take shape in the 1980s. At that time, national competitiveness in global markets became a policy priority, replacing the ‘jobs, growth and redistribution’ agenda of post-WWII ‘managed’ or ‘organized’ capitalism. In the neoliberal formula, competitiveness was to be achieved via a combination of domestically liberalized and deregulated product- and labor-markets (a return towards *laissez-faire*) and open economies. This particular policy package did not simply trigger the impoverishment of low-skilled workers and increase wealth inequalities – two phenomena on which now both the Left and the Right are focusing their mobilization. Neoliberal policies have triggered two additional developments.

First, the fault-lines of social conflict have been drawn across the former capital-labor divide. Capital and labor in companies well-positioned to profit from the

²⁰ Of course, the New Left’s agenda surpassed that of ‘rights’ – it offered a deeper understanding of the underlying structures of injustice (beyond economic class), as well as concerns with environmental justice which is an issue of systemic injustice. I here focus on the conceptual framework through which the Left tends to read the current populist insurrection.

new economy of open borders and information technologies (aka globalization) have come to form a cross-class alliance supporting neoliberalism. On the other side of the divide are workers, owners, and managers of companies for whom globalization is a source of threat to livelihoods. This means that politically relevant social experiences regarding the distribution of life-chances cut across the traditional class divide. Therefore, a revival of class politics would be politically futile. Moreover, a return to the policy formula of growth and redistribution of the ‘golden age’ of the Welfare State (as now urged by both the center-left and center-right) would not do much to dampen the global competition for profit through which the environment and human lives are being devastated.

The second peculiarity of neoliberal capitalism is that experiences of injustice are proliferating along the third trajectory of domination (systemic domination) – the one shaped by the competitive production of profit. Increased competition in the context of a globally integrated economy and a thinning social safety net has intensified pressures on all, but especially on people in occupations exposed to global competition. What is ailing the working, middle, and upper-middle classes in Western democracies is not only (or even mostly) inequality, but rather increasing precariousness, which is also affecting highly skilled and well-paid workers, as well as the owners and managers of companies exposed to global competition. Economic insecurity is an acute and spreading affliction that cuts across the class divide. It has become the core of the social question of our times.

Reformulating an agenda of social justice centered on fighting economic insecurity (and the unequal distribution of economic security) could help the Left gain back the support of voters it has lost to the far right. Such a focus on fighting economic insecurity would also help get some of the typical supporters of the center-Right on board – educated professionals whose livelihoods are threatened by global competition and whose welfare is put at risk by work pressures detrimental to the lifestyles they value. This would enable the Left to mount a broad counter-hegemony to neoliberal capitalism.²¹

²¹ For an elaboration of this proposal see Azmanova 2020.

Conclusion: Democracy is not enough

What is the Left needed for nowadays? – to return to Jurgen Habermas’ impertinent question. The far right is demanding not only cultural, but also social and economic protection. The centre-right is raising the minimum wage, launching a Pillar of Social Rights (in the European Union), is investing in job retraining, and pledging to fight inequality. Unless the Left finds a vision alternative to the old ‘jobs, growth and distribution’ agenda, it will not be among the intellectual forces shaping the future. I have suggested that the vocation of the Left in the current historical conjuncture is to forge a counter-hegemony against neoliberal capitalism, but that the essence of this counter-hegemony should be neither democracy -- not even ‘radical democracy’, as Chantal Mouffe has recently suggested-- nor a renewal of the class struggle, but a new socio-economic order.²²

Why isn’t democracy enough and what is wrong with the class struggle? Because capitalism has no specific body of dogma, no theology (as Walter Benjamin has noted)²³, it can fully appropriate democracy as its creed. Once capitalism as a social system -- a system of social relations -- has espoused democracy as a political system, it places it at its service. To the extent that the great majority’s livelihoods are dependent on participation in the process of capital accumulation, we cannot but expect democratic procedures to serve that process. Within this framework of thinking, the Left will keep facing the dilemma of either serving the short-term interests of its electorate in perpetuating the dynamics of capital accumulation, or serving the longer-term societal interest in protecting human beings and the natural environment from those very dynamics. The recent outbursts of popular demands in western democracies for undoing environmental legislation is an illustration of that uncomfortable choice.²⁴ The silence of Left parties when confronted with the choice between saving jobs and saving the environment is telling of the exact limits of

²² “[A]dopting a populist strategy, but this time with a progressive objective, intervening on a multiplicity of fronts,” Chantal Mouffe urges the Left “to build a new hegemony aiming at recovering and deepening democracy” (Mouffe 2018, 1.439).

²³ Benjamin, 1996 [1921].

²⁴ See, for instance, the ‘yellow vests’ protest in France (Nov-Dec. 2018):

<https://www.france24.com/en/20181116-france-yellow-vest-diesel-tax-protest-right-left-political-parties>

political democracy's power against capitalism. Within the framework of capitalist democracies, social reform can go only as far as it does not imperil those dynamics of capital accumulation on which the fortunes of the 'little man' depend.

In Rosa Luxemburg's famous formulation, "there are only two alternatives for mankind: socialism or the development of capitalism to barbarism - there is no third possibility" (Luxemburg, 1918b: 364). Despite, or rather because of the global affluence neoliberal capitalism has generated, the harms it has inflicted on individuals, communities and the natural environment amount to modern-day barbarism. The injustices of neoliberalism neither can, nor should be cast in terms of harms to democracy – as democratic deficits. These are harms generated by the very constitutive logic of capitalism – the competitive production of profit. The spectrum of these harms is vast – from impoverishment and damages to physical and mental health to fragile work-life balance and incapacity to plan for the future.

I have noted that a revival of the old agenda of class struggle, as it is becoming fashionable nowadays to urge, will be futile because there has emerged a solid cross-class alliance in support of globalization. We have come to a point in history when we do not need the class struggle to struggle against the core dynamic of capitalism – the competitive production of profit. Another cross-class alliance of neoliberal capitalism's victims has emerged and is growing. Irrespective of their vastly different income and education levels, a great multitude of people are suffering the harms of the ever-intensifying competitive production of profit – the core logic of capitalism. To mobilize this discontent, the Left needs to replace the old growth-and-redistribution agenda focused on welfare with one focused on well-being. It should bid farewell to the mantra of freedom through work and consumption, which the Right is now also espousing, and develop a policy paradigm centered on freedom from work and consumption.²⁵ The recent mobilizations in Europe and America for a Green New Deal carry this promise in a powerful way.

Right now, democracy is too little to ask.

²⁵ I cannot expound here the details of such a policy framework; for my proposal of combining universal basic income with universal basic employment into what I call 'a political economy of trust' see Azmanova 2011 and 2012).

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