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The ends of radical critique? Crisis, capitalism, emancipation: a conversation

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ABSTRACT

In a discussion of Albena Azmanova's book *Capitalism on Edge* (Columbia University Press, 2020), Amy Allen, Paul Apostolidis, Lea Ypi and Albena Azmanova debate key issues critical social theory confronts today. How should critical theorists re-engage with the critique of capitalism without entrapment in old ideological certainties? They revisit the classical debates about transformative agency, direction and methods of change, and the place of normative ideals and of moral theory in the critique of capitalism in light of the current historical juncture.

This conversation began as an online discussion in early 2020 of Albena Azmanova's book *Capitalism on Edge: How Fighting Precarity Can Achieve Radical Change Without Crisis or Utopia*, published in Columbia University Press's series 'New Directions in Critical Theory'.[1] The book engages Frankfurt School critical theory to articulate a diagnosis of contemporary capitalism's transformative contradictions, together with a proposal for recasting radical critique. Since its publication, the book has received awards from the International Studies Association, the British International Studies Association, as well as the American Political Science Association's 2021 Michael Harrington Book Award, which **'**recognizes an outstanding book that demonstrates how scholarship can be used in the struggle for a better world.'

Albena Azmanova: Critical social theory was conceived in the 1920s and 1930s in Frankfurt as a critique of the then emergent state-managed, 'organised' capitalism. That socio-historical period contained elements that were propitious for radical critique – the breakdown of 19th century liberal capitalism had generated a novel constellation of forces, ideas and methods of social control that were still to be discerned and interpreted; the economic crisis of the inter-war period was fueling social discontent and revolution was not far off[2]; the Utopia of socialism still had its allure, even as some thinkers on the left were growing wary of the nascent Soviet autocracy.

We now stand at a similar historical junction. The neoliberal form of capitalism is crumbling, creating the potential for an emancipatory transformation – a fruitful terrain for critical theory's re-engagement with a critique of capitalism. Such a project encounters, again, the signature challenge for a Frankfurt School style of critique: how can critique be transformative and immanent, that is, how can we remain committed to radical social transformation while only relying on resources for emancipation already available within society? And how to perform transformative immanent critique while addressing matters requiring moral judgment such as injustice, oppression, and domination? Forging an immanent radical critique of capitalism requires a fresh diagnosis of the form of capitalism we now inhabit, as well as a frank inventory of the available tools of critique. The old debates about transformative agency, direction and methods of change, the place of normative ideals and generally of moral theory in the critique of capitalism are back in – demanding answers befitting the current predicament.

Deploying some of the core tenets of Frankfurt School critical theory and adding new ones, in *Capitalism on Edge* I have suggested that the novel antinomies of contemporary capitalism – contradictions typical of the 'new economy' of open borders, information technology and intensified profit motive – create an unprecedented opportunity for overcoming capitalism without relying on a terminal crisis of capitalism, a revolutionary break, or a utopia. I have also suggested that radical critique in this context requires us to abandon some of the old certitudes of progressive politics, such as the 'class struggle' formula of conflict based on a capital-labor divide, itself rooted in the structure of property ownership, as well as preoccupations with distributive injustice (i.e. inequality), and focus more firmly on what I see as a palpable opportunity for building a broad societal front against the systemic logic of capitalism – the competitive production of profit.

In my diagnosis, due to significant changes in the political economy of globally integrated capitalism, the competitive pressures are now generalised so broadly in society that they affect people across social class, professional skills, levels of education, and even irrespectively of income and wealth. The result is an epidemic of precarity, which I have discussed as a condition of politically generated economic and social vulnerability caused by insecurity of livelihoods – a form of disempowerment that is typically experienced as incapacity to cope. This sense of failing to cope is itself rooted in a misalignment between responsibility and power, as public authority increasingly offloads responsibilities on individuals and societies – responsibilities they are unable to manage. Precarity, thus understood, harms people's material and psychological welfare – indeed, even that of the purported 'winners', and hampers society's capacity to manage adversity and to govern itself. In this sense, generalised precarity is the social question of our times – it is a transversal social injustice cutting across all other forms of social harm. That is why, I contend, a formidable alliance could be forged, for the first time, against the wellspring of capitalism – the profit motive which is the root cause of precarity. Be it inadvertently, such a mobilisation would be able to supplement capitalism with a new socioeconomic form. Do we need to name, to label, this post-

capitalist form? I do not think so. Immanent critique's proper job is to discern available opportunities for radical transformation; the direction of change towards a more just society will emerge incrementally from fighting the systemic roots of social harm.

Amy Allen: This book could not be more prescient. It is especially prescient when viewed from the perspective of the United States, where layoffs resulting from the COVID crisis spread from the relatively low paid service and hospitality sector to higher income jobs in law, health care, and administration, pulling back the curtain on the recovery from the global financial crisis of 2008 and revealing the widespread precarity that cuts across class divisions. Overall, I found the analysis of contemporary capitalism as marked overwhelmingly by widespread precarity generated by the drive for global competitiveness to be utterly compelling and timely.

Importantly, this cutting-edge diagnosis of the times emerges from a comprehensive analysis supported by a sophisticated methodological reflection. This kind of work is precisely what we need in contemporary Frankfurt School critical theory – work that resuscitates the distinctive contribution of political economy to the project of critical theory in a way that is attentive to the realm of actually existing policy regimes without in any way being faithful to the status quo.

I'm enormously sympathetic with Albena's method in this book, specifically her attempt to identify possibilities for emancipation in the present negativistically, by first analyzing relations and structures of domination and then considering how they might be practically transformed (rather than sketching a positive conception of utopia and defining emancipation in terms of that). However, the formula of critique Albena has elaborated raises some questions regarding the notions of domination, emancipation, and utopia.

Although I share Albena's hesitance about the concept of utopia, and I agree with her that we don't need a positive vision of utopia to do critical theory, I wonder about the status of her rejection of utopia. Does she reject it on normative and conceptual grounds – that is, does she maintain that the concept itself is dangerous because it rests on the pernicious fiction of a power-free form of life, or because it sanctions the worst evils in its name, or because it cannot possibly be glimpsed from within a wrong form of life? Or does she give up utopia on empirical grounds? It seems like the latter – for example when she says that 'the new ideological geography of the West . . . .leaves no space for utopia' (84) – but then I wonder about the evidence for this claim. It certainly seems as if those who cluster around the 'opportunity' pole of the new ideological configuration Albena discerns refer to some sort of utopian vision – represented by ideas like open borders, cosmopolitanism, technological advancement, networked interconnectedness, the information economy, etc. So, is it the case that there is no longer any space for utopia? Or has the locus of utopian vision shifted from socialist revolutionaries to the tech titans of Silicon Valley?

Lea Ypi: I disagree. We cannot do radical critique without utopia. To overcome capitalism (a commitment I do share), three components should be in place: a crisis, a revolution, and a utopian vision.

To take Utopia: I understand utopia as an ideal of human relations that is necessary to ground our critique of capitalism and of the societies in which it is entrenched, and that also shapes our vision of the societies which we want to emerge. I do not believe that this is the same as writing 'recipes for the cookshops of the future', as Marx accused utopian socialists of attempting, but I think it is important to have an account of what it is that makes capitalism wrong from a moral perspective. The same goes for the desirability of revolution and the way we understand and evaluate transformative practices that seek to move us beyond the status quo.

I have always been attracted to Rosa Luxemburg's account of revolution, and the way she analyses its relationship to social reform. As Luxemburg points out correctly, the difference between reform and revolution is not in the way in which we try to realize certain ends but in the content of these ends, in what it is we want to reach. She suggests, again, correctly in my view, that the difference between reform and revolution is not whether one is gradual and more likely to succeed, or more or less representative of the general will, but in the kind of political goals we commit to, in the question of who holds power and for what reasons, and whether those power relations are entrenched into a legal system or not. One thing that I was struck by in Albena's account and also in her set of positive proposals for what happens when we overcome capitalism and how to accelerate the transition is that they are all limited to policy proposals. But they do not seem to me to be political, in the sense that they do not speak to the redistribution of power relations in society and to the question of how you entrench those in the law. And so it seems to me that not much is said about the intersection between law and politics, and with reference to the political horizon within which those particular policy proposals are inscribed. And yet, if we try to turn these proposals into law and think about what fundamental transformations they bring to society, we might need a revolutionary upheaval of the status quo, and a very radical change in the legal systems we are familiar with. So, to return to the question of reform and revolution, the problem is not so much the difference in method – one is violent, the other is peaceful, one is slow, the other is faster – after all, history has familiarized us with reforms that are fast and violent, and with revolutions that are slow and peaceful. The problem is the difference in the content of fundamental legal disposition, the body of basic norms, whether and how fundamental principles of social cooperation are constitutionalized and how. The paths you discuss for overcoming capitalism, decommodification and the like, require a fundamental upheaval in the legal structures of our political institutions and a different set of power relations, in short, a revolution. And this in turn requires a normative vision within which we are able to assess critically your proposals, and to reflect on the related questions of justice and political legitimacy.

Albena Azmanova: My objection to relying, in the critique of capitalism, on utopia, a revolutionary break and crises, is above all on empirical grounds. It is rooted in my critical realist reading of the current historical junction. There is currently no terminal crisis of capitalism. Despite much talk about such a crisis, the economic dynamics of profit-creation are doing well; revolution, which I understand as a *sudden* upheaval of the social system, including its legal structures, is not in the offing, and despite some popularity among young people, the socialist and communist Utopias have lost their appeal for

most – so those things are simply not there as factors of radical change. I do not think that the ideals of the tech titans of Silicon Valley amount to a utopia. The great utopias (the backward-looking conservative utopias or the forward-looking Socialist ones) all presented a vision for the whole society. The fears of the losers and the lusts of the winners in the globally integrated digitalized capitalism of today are about personal gains and losses, sprinkled by ideals such as patriotism, cosmopolitanism and Elon Musk's plans to colonize Mars, but they do not amount to a comprehensive vision of a better world for all. So, I do not think a Utopia, one capable of moving society in a distinct direction, is really in sight.

Sure, it would have been great to witness the terminal crisis of the system, have an exciting utopia to show the way out so that we hand the keys to the concierge, 'I am off to the revolution'. In fact, I have done this (back in the 1980s, in my native Bulgaria), and I would do it again – I wish, indeed, that we could redo that one, as it went all wrong. I do, however, reject Utopia also on normative and conceptual grounds for all three reasons Amy noted, plus this one – a utopia demands faith, it nurtures in us a treacherous sense of normative certainty. I am an adept of what Kant called the 'scandal of reason' (the theme of my previous book)[3]. While Kant was frustrated with 'the scandal of ostensible contradiction of reason with itself', I fully endorse it: let reason vacillate between the extremes of uncertainty and dogma. A Utopia puts an end to that healthy wavering of reason. Then the horrors of history begin.

I agree with Lea that empirically speaking, crisis, revolution and utopia are very handy to have when we engage in the practice of radical transformation, but I see them not so much as *necessary* conditions for overcoming capitalism but as contributing, *facilitating* factors. In fact, in our current situation, the combination between a missing Utopia and a radical insecurity (precarity) is toxic – this combination nurtures conservative and reactionary political instincts, leading either to political inertia or to far-right mobilizations. But I also don't think that trying to craft a new Utopia, or to rekindle the spark of the old socialist utopia will do much good in the current context. Due to the spread of precarity throughout social hierarchies, a multitude is shaping up that is united by a (so far implicitly) shared interest in overcoming capitalism – because the root of precarity is the intensification of the profit motive. Forging alliances among different demographic groups, among strange bed-fellows, would require quite some work. A debate about which blueprint for a future we should embrace would be counter-productive – it would detract from focusing on the common cause – fighting the harm of precarity that capitalism keeps producing.

In such a context void of crisis, revolution and utopia as we inhabit now, we have two obvious courses of action. There is the realist path: give up the ambitions of radical critique and action because the enabling conditions are not there. Then there is the idealist path – sustain radicalism by either insisting that crisis, utopia and revolution are readily available, or attempt to instigate them. But there is a third path I've been trying to articulate: one of radical social transformation without the crutches of crisis, revolutionary break or utopia – the 'critical realist' path.

The real challenge for critical theory is to say: given that those three facilitating factors for radical change are missing, how do we maintain the prospects of social transformation that is radical and emancipatory?

To walk that path between normative idealism and pragmatic cynicism it helps to distinguish between radicalism in terms of the content of transformation and radicalism in the means of transformation, as Rosa Luxembourg's definition of revolution implies. And I am glad that Lea thinks my proposals for subverting capitalism by countering the profit motive amount to a revolutionary upheaval of the status quo – i.e., a radical change, this is exactly how I mean it. But I would reformulate Lea's statement: the steps that I discuss for overcoming capitalism – the set of policy changes I propose – they *do not require* revolution, but they *will amount* to a revolution without a rupture. Feudalism did not transform into capitalism through a blueprint – by the time the socialists coined the term 'capitalism', the system had existed for at least a century. The radical transformation of society had taken place turbulently but incrementally. This is usually how social transformation occurs, through a dialectic of mutually reinforcing disruptions and consolidations. The art of political leadership is to navigate this dialectic into a particular, already immanently available, direction. This direction is indicated by grievances of suffered injustice that critique needs to scrutinise, not by abstract moral theory.

As to the political dynamics at the intersection between law and politics – I see these currently being played out around the Green agenda (e.g., the European Green Deal). Recently, some European countries, as well as at EU-level, have constitutionalized environmental protection, despite opposition by both labor and capital (opposition motivated by fear of job loss and damaged competitiveness) – which can have huge implications for the way our societies function. One of the most acute conflicts blocking a move away from capitalism is the conflict within the Left: between the 'green' and the 'red' ideas, between proponents of environmental justice and proponents of social justice, as the latter group counts on the growth-and-redistribution formula that incurred the ecological trauma. Replacing the growth-and-redistribution mode of the political economy with anti-precarity policy, as I propose, can help resolve that conflict and advance us faster towards overcoming capitalism than say, a disruptive nationalization of productive assets. Meeting ecological targets while securing livelihoods would require countering the profit motive (the nationalization of the means of production would not achieve that, look at China) – which would amount not only to changing power relations between labor and capital, but to an even deeper, systemic change away from capitalism.

Lea Ypi: Let me clarify one thing: there is the issue of utopia as a tool of political mobilisation, and then there is the matter of normative guidelines in critique. Although I share part of Albena's commitment to an immanent critique, I also think that immanent critique needs a transcendental standpoint: a conception of reason needed to ground valid moral claims. I was struck by her remarks that we find immanent critique by observing specific instances of suffering and oppression which serve as empirical points of entry into the society that we seek to examine. But I think Albena also acknowledges that these claims don't automatically give us normative guidance; not every grievance in

society, not every claim to a violation of sorts, is a topic of moral concern. She agrees that there are some grievances that are more important than others and – I would add – some claims that are justified in light of an ideal of human relations, and others that are not. Albena says that to get some orientation into which of these grievances are going to be more relevant, and to decide which political campaigns are progressive and which ones are regressive, we must think whether the social pathologies they produce are significant. I am a bit concerned that speaking of social pathologies simply pushes the can down the road, assuming the moral harm is self-evident without giving us an account of what exactly is objectionable about them.

Insofar as I get an answer about a normative stance in your book, Albena, it seems to have something to do with the way in which power is exercised, i.e. some concern with oppression and domination. But what I would like to know is: what makes domination wrong? What is it that allows us to distinguish between arbitrary uses of power and authorized or legitimate or justified uses of it? I assume we agree that power has something to do with freedom, and with the exercise of freedom. How do we distinguish between justified restrictions (without which social cooperation will be impossible) and unjustifiable interferences with freedom? For that, we surely need a kind of moral theory, and then a political theory (or theories) able to connect our moral concerns to an analysis of institutions that exercise power over us.

Albena Azmanova: Lea raised the perennial question for critical theory: What makes domination wrong, and can we establish this immanently, without a recourse to a transcendental criterion, without the help of moral philosophy? Let us recall the position of the first generation of Frankfurt School theorists. They held that suffering is caused by relations of domination (*Herrschaft*), understood as illegitimate, 'surplus' repression, or oppression. As the exercise of legitimate power always implies repression, the point is to target critique at illegitimate forms of frustration. So, Lea is right, to know what is illegitimate, we need a normative gauge. This gauge, Lea suggest, is of transcendental nature. Maybe one day I will concede to this but not before I am fully convinced that we cannot make that judgment immanently, that is, without importing such a normative gauge into the context that is our object of critique. The solution I have proposed requires three steps.

First, we take grievances of injustice as empirical entry points, as these grievances might indicate an issue of unjustifiable, or 'surplus' oppression. Like Adorno, and later Iris Marion Young, I approach issues of justice immanently – from extant injustices, from claims to experienced or witnessed harm, as these perceptions of injustice contain the moral theory immanently. But then, as Lea observed, we get into the trouble of sorting out whose grievances matter – ergo, the need for a transcendental-normative crutch returns. I propose to solve this by taking as an entry point not just any grievances, but what are largely considered social pathologies (such as increased rate of workplace suicides, far-right mobilizations in the midst of affluence, high levels of xenophobia in countries with low immigration). These phenomena appear as pathologies from the point of view of society's understanding of itself. I take these pathologies to be significant analytically, not normatively – they indicate what society broadly views as abnormal – only in this particular sense these pathologies have normative value, the value of

epistemic normativity, the normativity of what is taken for granted as being in the normal course of things. Not because these pathologies will help us decide which are legitimate and illegitimate grievances based on a criterion of what is right, but because it can help us determine immanently that 'something is amiss' as Adorno would put it. And this is the case because these pathologies signal antinomies at work. That is why the broadly shared sensation that something is amiss is a powerful driver of emancipatory intellectual and political practice. At dissidents' gatherings before 1989, the regime was commonly criticized as being 'not normal.' We were driven by a sense of frustration that something was amiss, not by a blueprint for a just society.

The second step in distinguishing 'normal' repression (one needed for the purposes of social cooperation) from oppression as domination is to examine grievances against a normative gauge that is itself derived immanently from the shared practices, including the practices of moral disagreement. I call this 'a legitimation matrix' – a set of ground rules which emerge as shared views regarding (1) what constitutes a life-chance and (2) the fair distribution of life-chances in society. These ground rules are typically encoded in constitutions. What currently exists as shared substantive value-set in modern liberal democracies is (at least) a commitment to individual autonomy and equality of citizenship within collective self-determination. However, if critique stopped here it would be deeply conservative in nature – as normative standards endogenous to societies are often an outcome of domination and encode the worldviews of dominant groups.

The third step is to then trace these grievances of injustice to their socio-political roots, which is the trickiest part of critique: how to steer critique towards the deepest sources of injustice? To do this, I identify three distinct forms of domination: relational domination consisting in the oppression of one group over another as a result of the unequal distribution of power (here inequality and exclusion are the typical forms of harm); structural domination which is enacted via the control some groups have over key social institutions; and systemic domination which consists in the harmful subjugation of all to the dominant dynamic of social reproduction – i.e. the profit motive in capitalist societies that generates the harms of mass precarity and environmental devastation. While emancipatory critique should target all three forms of domination, I reserve the label 'radical' only to the critique of systemic domination. Because such critique, social criticism and political action strike at the constitutive logic of capitalism, thereby subverting it.

Lea Ypi: In fact, I thought I found in your book some hints at moral theory when you say, for example, that we should be guided by the principle of equal distribution of life chances. And I wonder why we should prioritise life chances, why are life chances valuable, what makes chances at all an important focus of critique. To me that requires some kind of normative theory, a grounding in moral philosophy.

I also detected in your book a commitment to a sufficientarian criterion of justice as opposed to an egalitarian theory of justice. You refer, for example, to Harry Frankfurt's remarks that we worry too much about inequality and that this has something to do with the politics of envy. And you suggest that instead of worrying about why the rich are so much richer, we should worry about the poor, which suggests that you want to prioritise

absolute deprivation as opposed to relative deprivation. However, it is worth bearing in mind that some instances of absolute deprivation are due to relative deprivation, and that we cannot actually distinguish so neatly between the two. For instance, there are certain kind of goods, positional goods, the absolute value of which depends on their relative possession.[4] Education is like that. We can't tell what minimal access to education requires without knowing what the relative value of education is. We don't know what the value of a Master's programme is, without knowing how many people around us have a Master's or a PhD. There is a whole range of normative questions to do with the comparative-relational nature of justice, and our understanding of relative vs. access requires a more detailed analysis of different theories. That leads to a more robust theory of justice, or freedom, or domination, however you want to call it, than you are prepared to endorse. And it is only with the help of that theory, that we can explain what exploitation is, what makes it morally wrong, what grounds alienation, what makes alienation wrong and so on.

Albena Azmanova: Lea remarked that with regard to poverty, we cannot distinguish between absolute deprivation and relative deprivation, suggesting that some moral theory would help us sort this out. I do not think this can be resolved by moral philosophy, for this we rather need social theory and a historicist account of the problems: we need attention to political economy, to social conditions. Maybe distributive issues could be sorted out on the basis of a moral philosophy (Rawls has attempted this, for instance, in his justice-as-fairness doctrine) – if wealth is taken to be an entity, a given, in need of being distributed fairly. But wealth first needs to be produced, and this is a matter of a social processes. Thus, if the political economy is set up in a way that the production of wealth is conditioned on incentives of profit-making, then any policy mitigating the drive for profit will damage wealth-creation, and with this, impoverish the poor further. The solution would lie in designing a new form of political economy, not a theory of distributive justice.

As to the moral weight of absolute deprivation over that of relative deprivation: this can also be sorted out immanently and empirically via scrutiny of the most ferocious public disagreements in our societies. Hardly anyone is ready to argue that we should impose economic equality if this would impoverish the most disadvantaged people. This concern with absolute deprivation is the normative assumption underlying Rawls' theory of distributive justice: 'all social primary goods – liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect – are to be distributed equally *unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage of the least favoured*.'[5] Actually the Coronavirus lock-down bore out the public sentiment about absolute versus relative deprivation: global inequality diminished as a result of the relative impoverishment of the rich countries. But this did not help the poor countries, rather the contrary – and no one, not even the most vocal critics of rising inequality celebrated this diminished global inequality as a form of progress – exactly because it was harming the poor.

Paul Apostolidis: I am thinking about Lea's remark about needing a moral gauge to weigh grievances of suffered injustice and Albena's comment on deriving that moral gauge

from claims to suffered injustice. To me, this conversation strikes at the heart of critical theory's troubles with both normative justification and research methodology. Whose grievances do we listen to, and how do we listen to them? In other words, what should be the relation between critical theory and popular discourses? One key aspect of Albena's reconstruction of what it means to practise critical theory is to reaffirm critical theory's investment in immanent critique. She argues that, rather than abstracting from historically shaped social circumstances and seeking to envision ideals of justice, a theory and politics of transformation must work from within concrete-material conditions and strive to ameliorate existing forms of injustice. I agree, but the problem, I think, is that she has theorized the antinomies of contemporary capitalism strictly on the social-structural plane.

Albena argues that capitalist society today is organised (or dis-organised, with a nod to Claus Offe) according to two fundamental antinomies. One is the problem of 'surplus employability,' which refers to the contradiction between the rising potential for de-commodified social life that automation enables, and the steady heightening of intensified, generalised 'commodification pressures' – we are all increasingly dependent on holding a paying job. In sync with themes in my own research and in the postwork literature, Albena finds that these pressures are palpably felt in today's growing, digitally enhanced inducements to work without pause and with single-minded compulsivity. This syndrome entrenches paid employment more than ever as the premier social value, even as the digital revolution creates unprecedented opportunities for generating social wealth with far less labour-time. This in turn relates to the second antinomy, which is that of 'acute job dependency.' This, Albena argues, is the predicament by which the economy produces fewer and fewer good jobs, yet people's reliance on paid employment keeps rising as wages continue stagnating and relentless austerity brings social supports to ever-more abysmal levels. And like the first antinomy, the second demonstrates how the condition of precarity is not just concentrated among society's lowest-wage and most disposable workers but rather infuses the labour economy as a whole. The social policies associated with a 'political economy of trust' (Albena's policy plan for fighting precarity) are thus universalist in scope, and the accent on state-led de-commodification and decreased job dependency responds directly to the two antinomies.

This otherwise insightful analysis is carried out entirely on the social-structural plane – but I think it is important to also pay attention to the distinctive ways various groups of workers today seem to be giving voice to these antinomies. We need to incorporate listening more attentively to these voices, confused and conflicting though they may be, within the process of theorising social contradictions and their remedies. I mean 'we,' as critical theorists who favour the methods of immanent critique. Practising immanent critique obligates critical theory to search among popular discourses not just for validation of our thought-models but also for vital sources of conceptual innovation. In this regard, I think Lois McNay has it exactly right in her exhortation to realize critical theory's unmet potential for incorporating expressions of 'direct experience' into the processes by which we generate critical theory rather than ultimately judging such experience from the philosopher's stance supposedly apart from it.[6]

Towards the end of chapter 6, Albena, you suggest that we can hear voices responding critically to the two antinomies when Occupy declares the 'outrage of the 99%' at the obscenely wealthy (164), when right-wing nationalists in West Virginia rally, when environmental activists protest against inaction on climate change, and when corporate executives complain about a badly skewed work-life balance.

As you know, I believe you are right to posit that anti-precarity sentiment can be discerned in virtually every quarter of society. Precaritization is a generally encompassing tendency driven by not just relational but systemic domination and generalised through structural mechanisms. Yet this needs to be substantiated empirically. More specifically, would you agree that the question is not just: are MAGA zealots, Google managers, and self-consciously organised groups of the precaritised, alike, expressing frustration with the antinomies you have theorized – but also: what languages are these popular groups devising and mobilising to articulate grievances and characterise them as injustices? Still more importantly: what can critical theorists learn about the best ways to conceptualise capital's contemporary contradictions, if we treat those languages as theoretically productive rather than social data that we objectify? I want to suggest that the move you make from theorising the two antinomies to calling for a political economy of trust needs to be mediated by considering how working people in diverse social quarters understand their conditions of work and life and the pathways toward improving things – on their own terms, with their own words.

Then the question arises: if rekindling the spirit of immanent critique means, at least in part, searching for intellectual sparks in ordinary workers' expressions of grievance and injustice, and in their vernaculars of struggle, then where should we focus our explorations? Which groups, and which movements, should we prioritise in analysing popular opposition to precarity – that is, if we are not satisfied with the easy answer that we can hardly go wrong, whatever we do, because precarity has systemic sources and implicates all sectors of society in its logics?

Albena Azmanova: Paul put it very well: we need to treat those languages as theoretically productive. The difficulty, as Claus Offe remarked during our debate in 2020 at the book launch, we cannot take these narratives at their face value: the unprotected are not in any way interested in overcoming capitalism. They do want protection, but many invoke a state that protects them by strengthening borders, they do not demand good jobs. So I agree, much more empirical research is needed on who is precarious and how they are precarious – my theoretization of the two antinomies as drivers of precarity has only a general modelling and predictive function (where to look for forms of precarity as a symptom of systemic domination). Paul notes that 'if precarity names the special plight of the world's most virulently oppressed human beings, it also denotes a near-universal complex of unfreedom'.[7] How far up the social ladder precarity reaches we still don't know – this should be determined empirically. We should study the diversity of precarity. That of IT engineers comes from the innovative pressures in the industry (their skills become obsolete very fast); that of workers assembling automobile parts comes from prospects for outsourcing. We could also speak of the stratification of precarity. The precarity of the rich, especially, is under-researched. As Isabell Lorey has observed, precarity creates hierarchization of insecurity which accompanies processes of othering.[8]

We can speak also of competition within precarity and of conflicts among precarities – all that needs fine-grained empirical research of the sort Paul has conducted on migrant day laborers in the U.S.

And that empirical work might confront us with things that challenge our expectations and disappoint our hopes. For instance, you note that typically workers blame themselves, not the system, for their difficulties; this unwarranted self-recrimination makes them live in the permanent angst of 'desperate responsibility'.[9] This internalization, if not endorsement, of competitive pressures surely stabilizes capitalism. Many of the most precarious workers want to save 'our capitalism' from 'global capitalism', demanding the sealing off of national labour markets from immigration.

This is why, when I look at social pathologies like the rise of xenophobia in conditions of affluence, I prefer not to privilege grievances – I do not have a moral theory to tell me whose grievances are more valid. Instead, I propose to listen to as broad a of spectrum of grievances as possible *together*; it is especially fruitful to listen to conflicting grievances – a method of immanent critique I elaborated earlier, in the *Scandal of Reason*, to explore how unconstrained public debates can unveil the common structural and systemic roots of seemingly incompatible claims to justice. What would we discover if we analyse together migrant workers' grievances and those of their purported enemies – the typical Trump constituency of low-skilled workers who feel threatened by the migrant workers? We will likely discover a shared experience of precarity rooted in insecure livelihoods that are being threatened by the policies governments adopt for remaining competitive in the global marketplace. If we dig still deeper in this direction, we arrive at the two antinomies of contemporary capitalism and their root cause – the increase in scope and intensity of the profit motive.

Paul Apostolidis: As to the scope of precarity, Albena and I had an interesting experience recently when we published a short article about precarity and the pandemic in *Jacobin*.[10] We stressed how the pandemic has lethally exacerbated the exceptional precarity of certain groups of highly vulnerable workers – meatpackers, day labourers, domestic workers, non-medical hospital workers, care home employees, Deliveroo riders, and the list goes on. Yet we also argued that COVID-19 exposes how precarity envelops the working world as a whole and assaults people on all rungs of the social hierarchy. Both in this article and in a similar one I wrote for *Public Seminar*,[11] we got real pushback from editors who wanted the message simplified. They wanted us to leave out the counter-intuitive second point, and just say: the coronavirus is ravaging the poorest working-class people and intensifying their precarity.

In left-popular public spheres, there thus appears to be real resistance to acknowledging the all-encompassing character of precaritization, and a stubborn insistence on framing precarity as exclusively the problem of poor, working-class, especially non-white others. Notwithstanding the appalling suffering of low-wage migrant workers, gig workers, and others on the labour economy's nethermost tiers, there might be a greater political need right now for research on precarity among more comfortably situated groups like mid-level executives, self-employed tech workers, or contingent workers in law and journalism.

Albena Azmanova: Yes, the Left is still enthralled by the 'class struggle'. But we need to start paying attention to the precarity of the winners. Not because we have any moral obligation for compassion with the rich, not even out of a commitment to democracy (they are part of the demos), but because their precarity in the context of generalised precarity has important political offshoots. Insecurity per se is not a problem – but the quest for safety it triggers has dramatic political implication. One such consequence is the erosion of previously existing solidarities among social classes, as everyone is now out to save their own neck. The educated middle and upper-middle classes have traditionally been champions for the poor, who are less politically active. This solidarity enabled the post-war Welfare State. Currently, the affluent are abandoning the poor, and the working classes are once again turning against immigrants for fear of job loss. Overall, precarity nurtures fear of risk which explains why no action follows the ardent policy commitments to good things such as environmental justice – the phenomenon of political inertia in times of crises. I have discussed these political offshoots of precarity in a piece running in the special issue of the journal *Emancipations* on precarity (August 2022) that Paul put together as guest editor.

Paul Apistolidis: The challenge is, then, to put research on the relatively well-off in dialogue with research among the most marginalised workers, in order to specify further what immanently derived popular terms would most effectively help politicise – and maybe also reconceptualise – the antinomies of precarity capitalism. And we must carry out that research in ways that don't risk homogenising experiences of precarity by glossing over the distinct circumstances of more obviously vulnerable groups. Here the notion of crisis is important. I do not mean the idea of a terminal crisis of capitalism, which I think Albena is right to question, but actual personal experiences of crises.

Another valuable contribution of Albena's work, extending back before the book but developed more systematically in *Capitalism on Edge*, is her thesis regarding 'the crisis of the crisis of capitalism.' She does critical theory a great service by insisting on the need to find a route toward emancipation as well as the possibility of doing so, notwithstanding capital's endlessly versatile capacities for turning breakdown into new profit potential. This is in sharp contrast, say, to David Harvey, who is brilliant at tracing capital's tactics for temporally deferring and geographically displacing its crisis-generating dysfunctions, but less helpful with discerning political paths forward. Likewise, I think she is on the mark when she analyses the paradigm-shift in the legitimation deal away from the neoliberal model that figured austerity-cuts and privatisation as necessary to heighten efficiencies in essential supports. Albena points to a new mode for which precarity without end is a given, with state-provided social spending simply not to be expected and irrelevant to state legitimacy, although massive state expenditures during the worst of the pandemic might lead us to reconsider this. Overall, though, I think she argues convincingly that neither political legitimation crisis nor capital accumulation crisis, of its own, can be relied on to generate radical energies sufficient to propel grand scale social transformation.

That said, it is important not to underestimate the degree to which subjective experiences of crisis pervade our contemporary, precaritised structure of feeling. These experiences take shape within the insecure and incessantly driven world of work that

you discuss, Albena. They mingle affect, body, and time. They feature, in part, the temporality of oppressive continuity, because the compulsion to work, prepare for work, search for work, and stay physically safe at work, never lets up. But they also exhibit the temporality of crisis: of rupture and discontinuity, whether due to the arrhythmia of gig-jobs, digital alerts that jolt users into sudden action as producers who expend micro-units of labour- time before again falling idle to await the next summons, or traumatic moments when workers' bodies get injured or break out in illness. I think this paradoxical ordinariness of crisis, as Lauren Berlant has termed the phenomenon,[12] can be politicised in ways that support broad-scale policies of social solidarity – again, as day labourers and worker centres have shown. But that requires finding ways for popular groups to give public expression to the crisis-aspect of this temporal figure, and for policy and political programmes to manifest responsiveness to crisis-experience. As Pablo Alvarado, executive director of the National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON), puts it, organizers – and, I would add, critical theorists – need to make time and space to 'let suffering speak.' I don't know if Alvarado has read Adorno, but you certainly might think he had done so, because he seems to have his finger on the pulse of immanent critique.

Amy Allen: This brings us back to our earlier conversation about the methodology of immanent critique that takes grievances as its diagnostic point of entry. How do we get from an experience of suffering to critique to emancipation? Albena has articulated a diagnostic typology of three forms of domination which are to be the targets of critique and emancipatory political action. The typology of domination in terms of relational, structural, and systemic modes is extremely helpful, and I was also very happy when she returned to this typology later in the book to consider how these specific forms of domination under precarity capitalism can be tackled and transformed. Still, I have some questions about how these different forms of domination relate to each other. The first concerns the relationship and interaction between relational and structural domination/injustice (and, as a related matter, how structural domination is defined). I would think that structural domination counts as domination precisely insofar, perhaps only insofar as it consists of social structures/institutions that create, reinforce, or maintain relational domination, meaning relations of domination between specific groups. So, for example, the private ownership of means of production, which is one of Albena's examples of structural domination, may not create but it certainly does reinforce and maintain class domination, pitting the interests of capitalists (to accumulate profit) against workers (higher wages). This is more or less how Marx understands the relationship between structural and relational domination, although of course he doesn't use those terms. If this is correct, then these two forms of domination need to be thought together, as mutually reinforcing parts of a larger picture. Sometimes this is how Albena presents these two forms of domination , but this seems at odds with how she actually defines structural domination as concerning 'the actors' incapacity to control the institutions through which the constitutive dynamic of the social system is enacted' (53), or 'the structures through which [powerful groups] exercise [their] power' (54). It seems to me that structural domination is less about either of those things and more about how certain social structures create the conditions for relational domination, the conditions within which relational domination can be exercised.

The second question concerns the relationship between systemic domination and the other two forms. Whereas structural and relational domination refer ultimately (though in different ways) to the power of some groups over others, systemic domination refers to the ways that all are subordinated to the overarching logic of capitalism, the competitive production of profit. The distinction between systemic and structural/relational domination thus has its roots in the distinction between Marx's critiques of alienation and exploitation. Another intellectual precursor that Albena doesn't discuss in the book is Iris Marion Young's distinction between domination (her term for what Azmanova calls systemic domination) and oppression, which is primarily structural for Young, thus need not but *may* be manifest in relational forms. .

But whereas Marx (and Young) make what seems to me to be a *qualitative* distinction between these different forms of power (alienation-exploitation for Marx, domination-oppression for Young), Albena' s distinction is a bit fuzzier. Sometimes it seems as if, for her, systemic domination is just a deeper form of structure that undergirds the structural and relational forms (eg: 'we need to focus our attention on the way the very constitutive dynamic of the system is instantiated in structural domination and expressed in relational domination' (175)). Relatedly, and this dovetails with Claus Offe's remarks during our initial discussion, it isn't clear that systemic domination in her sense actually affects *everyone* in precarity capitalism, as opposed to simply narrowing the circle of 'winners' to the 1% (or perhaps the .1%) – i.e., those who have sufficient income from non- employment based sources to escape the ranks of the precariat. What is it about the competitive production of profit that harms *them*, exactly? One answer here might be, and it is a subtheme running throughout the whole book, that they too are harmed by the environmental degradation generated by this systemic logic. So even if they are not subjected to precarity in so far as they are not reliant on the labour market for their income, they are subjected to environmental precarity. But notice that although this may well be true – assuming, of course, that the rich won't be able to escape many aspects of environmental crisis by buying access to clean water, land on higher ground, second homes on Elon Musk's Mars colony, etc – it stretches the use of the term domination in a way that it would be interesting to think about. In other words, I think that in the end, as Albena develops her analysis of the specific form that systemic domination takes in precarity capitalism, it becomes less clear how this form of domination is distinct from the structural form.

Albena Azmanova: Yes, I have sought to stretch the use of the term domination. The three-fold taxonomy of relational, structural, and systemic forms of domination has a specific analytical function – it is meant to help us trace various forms of injustice to their roots, and show that they are qualitatively different forms of social harm. This is positioned within a social theory that distinguishes between a social system's *constitutive dynamic*, the *structuring institutions* through which this dynamic is enacted, and the *distributive outcomes* of this dynamic. Applied to capitalism, the following story emerges: (1) The constitutive dynamic (pursuit of profit) subjects all participants to the systemic domination of capital accumulation which engenders alienation, environmental degradation, and precarity, experienced by most in various degrees. (2) The structuring institutions (private control of productive assets) generate the harm of exploitation. (3)

Unequal possession of material and ideational resources among actors might entail power asymmetries (the power actors have *in relation* to each other) – but not all of these asymmetries are sourced from the structuring institutions and systemic dynamics. Power asymmetries might engender the harms of inequality and exclusion. Of course, not all distributive asymmetries result in power asymmetries and not all power asymmetries result in oppression. This depends on other characteristics of the social system (e.g. whether material wealth translates into social privilege; this happens through specific practices and institutions, such as campaign financing in the U.S.).

I felt such a three-fold distinction is necessary so as to introduce some order into the discussion of power and social harm, and I have followed rather closely Marx's social theory (i.e., viewing capitalism as a system of social relations that is internally structured) in articulating the taxonomy. What is important to me is the link between (a) social harm, (b) the component of the social system that enables it, (c) form of domination. Critical theory is in need of this elucidation for at least two reasons.

The first reason has to do with the tendency to reify structure. As critical theory has recently rekindled its interest in capitalism, 'structure' is at the center of critique (it is the new 'cool' in critical theory, isn't it?) – notably in discussions of 'structural injustice'. But in such works structure is often reified because it is poorly defined, it figures as a nebulous entity endowed with agential power – it can do all kinds of things, and we, theorists, are happy to charge it with all the harms we can think of. In order to de-reify structure, I propose to speak of 'institutions with structuring effect' – in this way we can pinpoint the entity (usually instituted by law) that is the culprit: be it the private property of the means of production, the market as a mechanism of commodity exchange, the 'free' labor contract, the church, patriarchy, the electoral college, etc. These institutions, above all, serve as enabling structures for the systemic dynamic to be enacted. They have a structuring effect in the sense that they determine, systematically, the position of each actor in the process of social reproduction: they tell each of us what to do as we are engaged in the larger systemic dynamics (of profit-creation, under capitalism). I give examples with capitalism, but this applies to any social system. That these institutions have certain distributive effect is a separate matter. The *institution* of state property of the means of production might be engaged in a capitalist pursuit of profit (take China) but the distributive outcomes of this might very well be egalitarian – no relational domination occurs, but the systemic and structural ones are pretty harsh (people have no control over the institution of state control and suffer the imposed pressures to be competitive in the global economy). Here structural domination consists in citizens' subjection to the mechanisms of state control of society. This kind of domination is a different one than the systemic domination resulting from the pursuit of profit in the global economy into which the state engages its citizens. Helping us to trace harm to its specific origins – this is what the analytical device of my three-prong typology of domination is meant to do.

My second reason for introducing the distinction between structural and systemic domination is to facilitate a shift of focus from concerns with structures (i.e. the class structure engendered by the institutions of the private property of the means of production) to concerns with systemic logic (i.e. competitive pursuit of profit). The Left

is still dangerously, in my view, spellbound by the old Marxian concerns with exploitation enabled by the institution of the private ownership of productive capital. And that was the right focus in the context of the 19th century, when Marx conducted his analysis. But the political economy of contemporary capitalism is different. Forms of property ownership and professional tenure proliferate. A number of institutions (such the bureaucracies of autocratic states) are enacting the pursuit of profit. Let's take the fashionable idea of empowering workers by giving them a seat on company boards. In the context of a global rush for profits, such an inclusion will only increase workers' personal investment in the pursuit of profit, with all the nefarious consequences of that (self- exploitation, environmental destruction). The likely outcome of this is not emancipation from the profit motive, but rather the contrary; as Marx would put it, this will 'transform the relationship of the present-day worker to his labor into the relationship of all men to labor', as a result, 'society would then be conceived as an abstract capitalist'.[13] My idea is simple, at this historical junction, it is important to distinguish more clearly between *systemic principles* (e.g. the profit motive) and the structuring institutions through which these principles are enacted, because capitalism no longer relies on its reproduction on the familiar institution of the private property.

Amy mentioned Iris Marion Young's distinction between domination and oppression in her writing on structural injustice. It is a useful distinction indeed, and I have commented on it elsewhere.[14] However, I do not find it suitable for the particular purposes of my analysis. First, Young does not define 'structure'. Second, she predicates oppression on inequality while, as I noted, suffering generated by the subjugation to socio-structuring institutions can happen irrespectively of power asymmetries. And third, as you mention in your own commentary of her work, she tends to equate power with the narrower notions of oppression and domination.[15] I think this is the case because she fails to position her analysis of structural injustice within an articulated social theory, that is, a theory of society.

As to systemic domination, I do follow here the direct link Marx draws between the profit motive and alienation as its outcome – especially a reading of Marx that expands alienation to all who are engaged in commodity production. But let me give another example. The thinker who best captures the all-embracing nature of systemic domination in the way I see it is Pierre Bourdieu in *Masculine Domination* (1998). In his account, both men and women are oppressed by the norms of masculine domination in the androcentric Kabyl society of the 1960s Bourdieu studied. Even as men had relational power over women (to use my taxonomy), they were oppressed by the very norms of masculinity that empowered them. I have used Bourdieu's analysis to argue that the victories of second-wave feminism in empowering women via granting them inclusion in the labour market have amounted to their surrender to the systemic domination of capital accumulation.[16]

You are right, Amy, to press for a clearer distinction between structural and systemic domination, and I am glad you think that my expanded notion of domination is promising. Structural domination is difficult to pin down because in fact it serves a double function: it is indeed, as you put it, about how certain social structures (I would say 'structuring institutions') create the conditions under which relational domination

can be exercised. But it is also about the way these institutions help enact the constitutive logic of the social system even if no relational domination ensues.

So, in a nutshell, this particular taxonomy of domination helps me claim that poverty, inequality and exclusion (relational injustice), exploitation (structural injustice) and alienation, ecological trauma, and precarity (systemic forms of injustice) should not be all lumped together – they have different sources and we should fight those sources according to the effect we mean to achieve. In other words, don't count on just fighting inequality and exploitation if you are serious about overcoming capitalism. Fighting structural and relational forms of injustice is commendable, but I do not consider this radical critique and action in any way. Appeals for fixing the system by reducing internal inequalities and exclusions only enhances the value of the system; this is how fighting relational and structural domination often inadvertently aggravates systemic domination – what I call 'the paradox of emancipation'.[17] So, we need to remember that not all so called 'progressive' policies – policies that alleviate suffering, are radical and even emancipatory, in nature.

Lea Ypi: This brings us to the solutions you propose, to the particular policies that you suggest but also to the issue of agency. For example, when you talk about structural measures and you say that what we need is greater taxation, I wonder to what extent greater taxation requires overcoming capitalism. Taxing does not seem to me to be about overcoming capitalism as much as keeping it under control, and a number of other reforms mentioned in the book are also offered in that spirit. They seem to be measures that will enable us to tame capitalism, to enter into a different stage of capitalism, to have a capitalism with a human face. But I don't really see how we would actually overcome capitalism through these measures, and I am also not convinced that they really tackle the problem of the moral wrong of capitalism. Instead, these reforms risk entrenching it even further. The same applies to your discussion at the very end around systemic policy proposals, such as recasting globalization or recasting domestic policies.

Amy Allen: Here the 'paradox of emancipation' springs up, doesn't it? And this time it is haunting Albena's own account of emancipatory social change. The paradox of emancipation, to recall, refers to the ways that attempts to ameliorate relational and structural domination can reinforce systemic domination by strengthening the logic of the overall system. This is a powerful and insightful claim, so much so that Albena's attempt to dispel this paradox in the conclusion to the book strikes me as a bit too easy. The question of how Albena could avoid her own paradox started to emerge for me in chapter seven, when she notes that taxing the rich may be a good place to start (173). So, I was happy to see her address this directly in the conclusion (194). Still, I'm not sure precisely how this paradox gets dissolved. I think that the answer is supposed to be that the current stage of capitalism has generated such widespread discontent and unhappiness that the time is ripe for its own overcoming through a passive revolution. But this assumes that systemic domination really does harm everyone – if it doesn't in fact harm the 1% who are shielded from insecurity and precarity, then aren't we just as likely to be heading towards full scale oligarchy? That issue aside, how does this claim help to address the paradox of emancipation? Won't it still be the case that the

stabilization of production, employment and income that Albena contends are necessary conditions for political agency (and means for redressing relational and structural domination) will still serve to reinforce capitalism?

Albena: Of course, we cannot fight capitalism by taxing it – that would be grand, wouldn't it? Reforms aiming at fighting relational and structural domination would stabilize capitalism – no two ways about it. And it will be absurd to propose that we don't fight these forms of harm for fear of stabilizing capitalism; at least I would not say that. Such steps are important not only because they alleviate suffering (so, on ethical grounds), but also because in the current junction they create the enabling conditions for transformative agency. Redistribution, worker control of companies, building the commons, all these measures for diminishing relational and structural domination help fight precarity because they empower people (remember the essence of precarity is disempowerment).

The issue of agency is very tricky in the contemporary context. On the one hand, precarity (generated by the profit motive's running amok) disempowers people, so we need to empower them by decreasing precarity, but this in turn stabilizes the system. This is the real conundrum. The emancipation paradox cannot be avoided, the only thing we can do is to be aware of it and remember not to be bogged down in fighting structural and relational injustice alone. We must keep our eye on the target – eliminating the pursuit of profit, the profit *motive* (incidentally, not the same as growth). That is why I am careful to distinguish between measures that empower actors by reducing inequality, exclusion, exploitation, strengthening the commons – and for this we need taxation, we need decoupling social provision from the labour contract etc. – from measures that fight the profit motive. The former are emancipatory, but not radical. The transition from building enabling conditions for transformative agency (conditions that at the same time stabilize capitalism) to radical practice is a matter of responsible political agency – intellectual and political leadership that works on relational and structural forms of domination but keeps its eye on systemic domination.

Lea Ypi: This bring us back to the question of the relationship between policy and politics. I also worry that Albena does not seem to take into account the levels of conflict that even the implementation of a very minimal part of these proposals would cause in the liberal democracies that we know. How should we understand transformative agency in the current circumstances to enable us to make feasible these policy proposals? How can we mobilize the kind of political will necessary to turn these policy commitments into substantive entrenchment in law, and how can we preserve the results achieved and not leave them vulnerable to electoral fluctuations? How can we actually get from the policy commitments advocated here to the kind of constitutional changes that would be required in order to preserve these gains in the long term, even assuming they are feasible in the short one?

Further to this, another concern I have is that both sets of proposals seem to me to be very focused on Europe and on advanced liberal democracies more generally. But I think we also need an account of what happens to marginal or peripheral countries if we want to evaluate the kind of paternalistic, neocolonial, attitude advanced liberal

democracies cultivate towards such societies. You are all familiar with the structural reforms the EU imposes on prospective candidates as a condition for membership, or with the conditionalities attached to development aid given to third parties. You also know about the critiques of paternalism that these approaches often attract. So, there is too much focus on Western European society and rich liberal democracies and relative neglect of what happens to other parts of the world – not just Brazil and China and India, but also candidate EU members, smaller states and so on. How should we conceive of politics in these places in order to be able to deal with the high levels of conflict that will be exacerbated once these policy proposals are taken seriously, and how should we respond to ruling elites fighting back when their interests are undermined?

Albena Azmanova: Post-Marxian critical theory has always been haunted by the matter of political agency, the constitution of the revolutionary subject. The conundrum of agency in our times is this: the intensified and generalised profit motive creates mass precarity; the thirst for security nurtures conservative attitudes, thereby stabilising the very system that generates precarity. The challenge is to break this vicious circle, as we cannot wish it away by calling for a revolution – a revolutionary subject is missing, and not because that subject is coopted by capitalism, seduced into the lull of vulgar consumption; no, that subject is scared, she is completely motivated by fear and blaming herself for her incapacity to cope.

So, before we appoint a revolutionary subject, we need to address the enabling conditions for her emergence. Let's screen the landscape for such conditions. A curious feature of the current historical juncture is the multiplicity of axes of conflict and cooperation – and I trace some of those in the book. For instance, both workers and employers in industries reaping the benefits of the digital economies of scale have a vested interest in the perpetuation of global market integration. On the other hand, property owners threatened by neoliberal globalisation were among the Yellow Vest protesters. My point is that the revolutionary subject can no longer be pre-packaged according to structure (the neat indicators of property status). The institution of the private property and management of the means of production is still there, but it does not have a strong socio-structuring effect, and this is what matters – not whether the institution exists, but what is its structuring effect which in turn determines its political relevance. The political relevance of the private control of productive capital has diminished for two reasons. One, because of the diversification of forms of ownership and professional tenure. So, the structure of ownership does not determine social status, other factors play a stronger role (type of skill, education, ethnicity). Second, alternative institutions (e.g. the democratic and autocratic state) are engaged in the pursuit of profit.

What we can do is examine the cross-cutting lines of conflict and cooperation, discern nascent alliances and think about how to mobilise them in the right direction – from how best to politicize these grievances (as Paul noted) to what forms that mobilisation should take.

Lea is right, I do not speak much about conflict in *Capitalism on Edge* (except in chapter 3 where I trace the emergence of an opportunity-risk divide cutting across the capital-labour conflict), because I assume conflict is there – any social transformation invites conflict. Actually, I find that the gravest issue about conflict in our time is that

precarity makes people averse to conflict, fearful of change even when they understand very well that change is necessary – this is what wipes out agency. Precarity diminishes the resources for 'creative disruption' (the far-right mobilizations are disruptive but not creative, not constructive). That is why I endorse some policies for their capacity to create *the enabling conditions* for agency even if they stabilize the system. As I noted, the measures for fighting systemic domination are another ball game – they are the real deal, they have the goal of subverting capitalism.

Paul Apostolidis: When it comes to forms and means of mobilisation, I wonder whether in fact we don't need class politics even as we admit that precarity works across the class divide. I wonder, in particular, if some re-formulated concept of 'class' might be of use in developing this kind of analysis. The common, left-popular conception of precarity as located and fixed within the poorest working populations is sometimes accompanied by announcements that a new 'class war' has broken out. *The Nation* used this sensationalist declaration to frame its exposé of rampant COVID-19 threats in US meatpacking plants and the federal government's use of emergency defence powers to force a largely migrant and Black workforce to stay on the job despite the infection risks. Beyond the spheres of left journalism, NDLON released a set of popular education guides on COVID-19 and health and safety on the job for people whom the network called not 'essential workers' but 'the essential working class.'

I am with you, Albena, in arguing that it's necessary to develop a universalist vision of social politics and policy when we recognise that precarity spreads its reach over society in general rather than only attacking society's most beleaguered groups. But I am not convinced that advancing such a universalist politics of solidarity, on its own, is enough to win cooperation by the heralds of a new class war. They miss the suffusion of precarity throughout the economy as a whole, but they intuit something crucial, which is that there are categorically distinguishable types and levels of social suffering today.

Perhaps the best response would be to embrace a rhetoric of class while theorizing class in a new way that draws attention to class-differentiated permutations of generalized precarity. Or, would you argue that to pursue a more universalist politics that corresponds to the systemic engines and reach of precarity, and that gets the precaritized middle classes, professionals and wealth owners on our side, we are better off de- emphasizing both the rhetoric and the critical organization of class?

Albena Azmanova: I am indeed skeptical of the mobilization potential of class politics now. Much as the rhetoric of class struggle is effective in mobilizing short-term agitations, as well as in publishing op-eds in the leftist media (it is an emotive rhetoric that gives us a feeling of being on the right side of history), I fear it is not the apposite tool for activating the particular potential for change that is opened now. There are two reasons for this. First, the working classes themselves are averse to the rhetoric of the class struggle. To recall a remark Claus Offe made at our first discussion, the challenge to politics of class struggle as a struggle against the profit motive (and ergo, against capitalism), is in convincing the working class to embrace de-commodification as a goal. Emancipation means to have a real option to say no to the need to sell your time. Since the 80s, various countries such as Germany and France endorsed de- commodification

policies, but it turned out workers did not really want them. Because there are two ways of rewarding productive activities. One is money and one is time. And the fact is that money beats time as a method of rewarding labor, as Claus noted. Many people cannot afford free time because they have to pay bills. Another argument is that you cannot save time the way you can save money. And then there's an argument that in order to enjoy free time, you need money. This is what he thought deficient in my argument: that my appeal to fight commodification might not fall on fertile grounds. The key question, as Lea has also mentioned is the question of political agency and the question of policies that make sense to people who are suffering from precarity. What is the proper organizational form within which the desire for change can develop and can grow? I agree that this is a question that cannot be answered by the perspective of multitudes that form alliances, we need an organizational understanding for the forms for anti-capitalist change.

The second reason why I am skeptical of the rhetoric of class struggle has to do with harnessing the peculiar opportunities of this historical moment. Over the past century, the paradigm shifts in the socioeconomic organization of liberal democracies – such as the shift from the liberal capitalism of the 19th century to the 'organised' capitalism of the first half of the 20th century and then to the neoliberal capitalism of the 1980s and 1990s – were all enabled by a broad coalition of forces, across the left-right divide, pushing society in the same direction. Never before has there been such a diverse multitude adversely affected by the pursuit of profit as now – there is a real opportunity here. The path of the class struggle would be detrimental to the formation of a new political commonsense around the need to counter the profit motive that is the main engine of generalised precarity.

Taken together, four ideas from our discussion so far, it seems to me, offer us clues for the way ahead. First, precarity, rooted in the insecurity of livelihoods, cuts across the traditional capital-labor class divide and keeps spreading throughout society. Second: it takes different forms for different groups; as Paul put it, 'there are categorically distinguishable types and levels of social suffering today'. Third, the precaritised multitude lacks agency to self-organise for a battle against the driver of precarity – the profit motive: disempowerment is the essence of precarity. Fourth, the overworked professional classes embrace decommodification but within the most disadvantaged groups, precarity fosters a desire for more commodification, not less. However, this is the case only under certain conditions – when paid work is a form of safety measure, a way of reducing precarity. People increasingly value their non-productive time, even beyond the famous 'work- family' balance, and social surveys display this. If people are given real options to say no to the need to sell their time, they will do it.

This means that, in the absence of a positive grand utopia, the politically driven multitude can become a revolutionary subject in the course of political mobilizations for fighting specific injustices related to the insecurity of livelihoods and work-related pressures. We should push responsibility back to where it belongs – with the intellectual and political leadership. They (and we as critics) should offer goals and policies that make sense to people who are suffering from precarity. Another responsibility, as Paul suggested, is to politicize people's sense of crisis in ways that support broad-scale

policies of social solidarity, and then put in place micro forms of collective empowerment, such as collectives and unions. These practices of micro-mobilizations would reduce competition among citizens, and eat away at the dogma of competitiveness. This should take place, as Lea noted, via the constitutionalization of long-term commitments (such as environmental responsibility) whose implementation would equal the elimination of the profit motive. But some of this is already underway: radical change seems to have taken its course while we have been busy pondering it.

EPILOGUE (Albena Azmanova)

Our conversation took place during the pandemic, but a new social reality seems to be emerging in its aftermath. As Paul noted, massive state expenditures designed to mitigate the death toll from the pandemic revealed the fragility of the intellectual and political consensus holding together neoliberal capitalism. Meanwhile, the 'great resignation' and 'quiet quitting' – phenomena of the early post-Covid period, display significant appetites for decommodification. Might these be signs that the pandemic has opened up some spaces of resistance to the systemic logic of capitalism?

To gauge the emancipatory value of these trends, they should be put in context. The states' blatant discarding of market logic in order to save lives and livelihoods during the pandemic shouldn't distract from the fact that government spending surged largely through increased transfers to households and businesses, rather than investments in the commons. This means that the privatization of social welfare and the individualistic political common sense, those flagship features of neoliberal rule (for neoliberal reason denies the reality of anything beyond the self-interest of individuals), remained intact. As a result, the precarity of all persisted, even as the precarity of many individuals and firms was temporarily assuaged through redistributive measures that prevented a total collapse in consumer spending. These measures were well in line with neoliberalism's distrust of the idea of the market as a natural order, distrust that undergirds public authority's actively working to generate economic dynamics. The neoliberal governmentality was thereby salvaged not despite but via the decision to fight the pandemic through lock- downs that damaged the economy. Moreover, as central bank support triggered a surge in stock markets, the boom was skewed towards larger firms in select sectors, notably high- tech and pharmaceuticals, whereas many in the old economy, both capital and labour, remained in difficulty. While some have the luxury of exiting the system by personally quitting the rat race, others are practicing the now popular 'career cushioning' – matching a solid employment with a solid Plan B for an alternative job before they actually need it, just in case. 'Career cushioning' is a form of surplus labour commodification, a 'reserve commodification' of sorts, and it is fueled by generalised precarity, itself an offspring of the intensified and generalised profit motive. These controversial trends suggest a sharpening of capitalism's antinomies – a perfect environment, indeed, for radical critique and action.

Notes

1. Book symposium on *Albena Azmanova's Capitalism on Edge*, convened by Azar Dakwar, 21 May, 2020:https://youtu.be/4e8YKk0UrCc

2. The successful 1917 Socialist revolution in Russia had made the possibility of a revolutionary upheaval part of the political common-sense of the early 20th century. With the November revolution of 1918 in Germany, the Marxist revolutionary movement Spartacus League led by Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, and Clara Zetkin established itself as a nationwide organization aiming to institute a soviet republic in Germany. More broadly in the world, discontent with capitalism was acute in the first decades of the century. Writing in the early 1940s, Joseph Schumpeter comments on the rising popularity of Marxism and the ubiquitous 'atmosphere of hostility to capitalism', with the public mind 'so thoroughly grown out of humor with it as to make condemnation of capitalism and all its works a foregone conclusion [. . .] whatever his political preference, every writer or speaker hastens to [. . .] emphasize his critical attitude, his freedom from "complacency," his belief in the inadequacies of capitalist achievement, his aversion to capitalist and his sympathy with anti-capitalist interests.' Schumpeter J., 2003[1943]. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. London and New York: Routledge.

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5. See McNay L., 2022. *The Gender of Critical Theory: On the Experiential Grounds of Critique*. Oxford: Oxford University press.
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16. Azmanova A., *Capitalism on Edge*. 7–8, 56–57, 133–134. See also Azmanova A., 2019. 'The Paradox of Emancipation: Populism, Democracy, and the Soul of the Left'. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 45(9-10), 1186–1207.

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