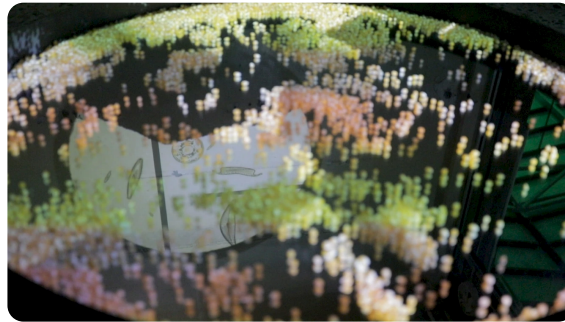


# Austerity and Utopia – Editorial Foreword

Part of Austerity and Utopia

Nav Haq, Pablo Martínez, Corina Oprea

11 May 2020



Stills from 'Who is Afraid of Ideology? – Part 3' (2020) by Marwa Arsanios; set concept and design by Vinita Gatne; photography: Mahmoud Safadi.

This little era

Does not dream

Does not dream, yes

Does not dream, no

Spanish ecofeminist Yayo Herrero recently stated that 'dystopias are becoming extremely conservative', suggesting that our imagination is trapped by negativity and fear. Performance theorist José Esteban Muñoz wrote about the present as a prison, where, in a world without utopia, minority subjects are excluded and seen as hopeless. If fear and hope are both affective structures that can be considered anticipatory, we prefer to devote this issue to the latter. It seems that in moments like the current crisis of civilisation, with a pandemic affecting a whole generation and a planet that shows more and more signs of exhaustion, hope as a political anticipatory affect must be the first thing to activate rather than the last to lose; as researcher Max Haiven describes, the enclosure of the imagination is the trap of neoliberalism.

Whilst utopian scholars such as Ruth Levitas question the suitability of the term

'utopia' as a universal classification, there are equally re-articulations of utopia as liable means of reconstituting an unsettled society. Returning to the modern notion of utopia developed by Ernst Bloch in *The Principle of Hope* (1954), and going beyond the colonial utopia formulated by Thomas More, this issue focuses on the possibilities of both abstract and concrete utopias. 'Abstract' in the sense that it can inspire political imagination and draw horizons of collective emancipation and transformation, as depicted by Emilio Santiago Muíño in his eco-socialist fiction. And 'concrete', as articulations of political and historically situated alternatives, like the feminist communities that artist and researcher Marwa Arsanios encountered in her recent project *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?*

'Let's shake out mentalities, change subjectivities, withdraw from the capitalist system altogether': this is the radical standpoint advanced by factions of the revolting masses in North Africa and in the Middle East and harvested by young protesters in Greece, Spain and elsewhere in the face of austerity measures (one could name here, without exhausting the full list, the Iranian Green Movement in 2009, the anti-austerity movement in Greece since 2010, Tahrir Square in Egypt and the Tunisia Revolution in 2011, and the Indignados in Barcelona and Madrid from 2011–15). Austerity is a violent means employed by neoliberalism, which takes form as lower wages, the dismissal of public workers and cuts to social programmes. Undoubtedly, the world is in a situation of fatal economic disaster, crisis and breakdown, but austerity as another means of accumulation must not be the solution. Social and political scientist Athena Athanasiou speaks about dispossession and the unsustainable consequences of neoliberal management over life itself, 'as much as current neoliberal austerity is injurious for most people'. And as we shift to a necessary post-carbon society, in which the consumption of fossil fuels will have to be considerably reduced over time to avoid planetary devastation, it is not only political amendments and the substitution of technologies, but social and cultural alterations to our ways of living that are vital. Haiven opens his text towards the potential of crises, whether ecological, economic or identitarian, to alter the terrain of radical political possibility and set up new sites for structural transformations and strategic interventions.

Moving from global historical events to phantasmatic world history, this edition gathers analysis and engagement with the various contradictions and possible emancipations that the term 'austerity' generates, together with the radical, transnational desire to unravel utopian promises. In an effort to expand conceptions of austerity and utopia beyond the economic paradigm, we enter into a different epistemological realm which recognises a multitude of knowledges. Any call for imagining another world must involve artists, performers, composers, writers and thinkers. This thought-provoking exercise, then, seeks to elaborate on other understandings of austerity and its relations to utopia.

The verse that opens this editorial note comes from *Nana de esta pequeña era* (This little era lullaby), an audiotext created by poet and performer María Salgado and the musician and composer Fran MM Cabeza de Vaca (on view here on L'Internationale Online's broadcast channel from March to September 2020, and published with a print created on the occasion of this issue). Sounds and words in this aesthetic tool play with the intrinsic structure of the popular genre of the lullaby, a song usually used to send children off to sleep and to alleviate their fears. Inspired by Guy

Debord's 'Nana de la Zarzuela' (Zarzuela Lullaby), a 1981 remake of Federico García Lorca and La Argentinita's 1931 recording of the popular 'Nana de Sevilla' (Seville Lullaby), this online lullaby seeks to soothe a deeply damaged sociopolitical context – the lullaby does not lead to slumber, but to political activism through poetics.

The issue begins with a story by Santiago Muíño, who places himself in a Galician village in 2052 and sends a letter to Jorge Riechmann, the poet and fundamental figure in eco-socialist thought. From these other historical coordinates and fuelled by their friendship, Santiago Muíño depicts new ways of living based on austere sustainable practices. Beyond the idea of civilisational collapse that permeates the media today, the upcoming fifties of this century appear full of luxurious poverty, a simple life rich in the pleasures of bodies, words and relations with the environment. Written prior to our current confinement, with home lockdown practices of reduced mobility and more time for cooking and reflecting on food production, this reading can be seen as anticipatory.

By citing fellow theorist Lauren Berlant's 'crisis ordinariness', Athanasiou turns to 'affect' to comprehend the state of continued crises. By tracing the various impasses that we face today, she acknowledges that certain normative forms of living are no longer bearable. Referring to Muñoz too, she proposes queer futurity as 'a mode of endurance and a critique which resists genealogical, reproductive "straight time"'.

In her text 'The Production of the Utopian Image', Arsanios considers the possibility of a feminist utopia. She asks if new social relations can be formed outside of capitalism and industrialisation and builds her considerations around the model of a commune based on seed guardianship, food sovereignty and the re-appropriation of land previously dispossessed. Describing her encounters with Indigenous communities in Colombia, Arsanios imagines utopia as autonomy created within given political contexts of violence. The questions she poses come from experiments conducted by communities of women in three war-torn places: in Kurdistan; Jinwar, Rojava, in the autonomous region of northern Syria; and in the cooperative Beqaa Valley, eastern Lebanon. The first two locations are to be seen in *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?*, part 1 and part 2, broadcast on L'Internationale Online from May to September 2020.

Haiven's essay describes the behaviour of neoliberal capitalism, in particular its vengeance of utopian social narratives. Considering austerity as a kind of 'economic sadism' of insurmountable debt combined with the decimation of the social safety net, revenge is inflicted to pre-empt workers' resistance to the capitalist system, Haiven states. And further, 'revenge is an oddly fitting way to describe a form of capitalism that, in its own utopian drive, creates conditions which appear not only exploitative and oppressive, but irrationally vindictive'. He asks, how might we create forms of counter-vengeance and refusal by harnessing our historical consciousness?

In his contribution, Miguel López explores some of the practices that took place post-1970s in Chile, a time when neoliberalism found its topos and began to carry out its social experimentation. Starting from art practices as politically situated as those of Cecilia Vicuña, Francesco Copello and Juan Davila, he underlines the

grammar that emerged from artistic collectives which employed craft and ephemeral materials, such as trash and refuse. Since last October Chile has been shaken by waves of protest against the devastating neoliberal policies which have suppressed any claim to the commons. New practices based in word, body and public space, like the performance *Un violador en tu camino (A Rapist in Your Path, 2019)* by Lastesis, find their genealogy in these actions after the 1970s.

Ayesha Hameed's long-form poem about the Citizenship Amendment Act in India evokes the sit-ins that took place in Delhi in 2019, led by a group of Muslim women. The poem is a personal and political cry to the racial and religious oppression multiplying worldwide at the speed of light: 'a half-life as margin of witness.' The poem is joined by 'Black Atlantis: The Plantationocene', a live audiovisual essay on Mother Earth's alteration in late colonial capitalism. Taking Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing's term 'plantationocene' to connect our geological era with the legacy of the plantation, Hameed asks: What is the relationship between climate change and plantation economies?

This issue, titled *Austerity and Utopia*, is the first in a series that looks at other potential narratives for mapping our current landscape by redefining social, political and economic terms. It was planned a long time before the pandemic. Our current situation was unimaginable just a few months ago, but that it was not easily predictable does not mean that there were no elements pointing to a possible crisis of this nature. Yet the collective search for measures of care and climate justice in the attempt to redefine the neoliberal understanding of austerity and utopia – two major points of the current socio-economic formation – becomes even more pressing. We have written this editorial foreword in confinement, at a time when the desire for things to go back to normal is ever-present and much discussed. But is 'normality' what we really want? And if so, whose normality shall we return to? We need to reimagine the role that art and cultural institutions play in the production of a new set of relations and other modes of production and distribution. One can no longer think in terms of abundance, in terms of the desire of accumulation and the capitalist utopia, which only creates inequality and exhaustion.

The views and opinions published in this section mirror the principles of academic freedom and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of the L'Internationale confederation and its members.

