

# Time and Again, No Longer, Not Yet

Part of Austerity and Utopia

Athena Athanasiou

11 May 2020

## The Utopian Urge of Capitalism: Promised, Deferred, Distributed Life Power

In what ways might critical(ly) situated knowledges – operating necessarily from the inside (i.e. the very meshes of subjectivation and knowledge/power) and hopefully beyond the limit – induce potentialities for ‘our times’ despite and against the biopolitical timescapes of present and future? This question calls for critical epistemologies and imaginaries of alternative differing and deferring temporalities, capable of engaging the present contingencies and producing possibilities for anti-fascist cultural criticism and political life, in a present structured through what Lauren Berlant calls ‘crisis ordinariness’ (2011).<sup>1</sup>

1. Berlant, Lauren 2011. *Cruel Optimism*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

Although the neoliberal doctrine of ‘there is no alternative’ has been sedimented as the normalised paradigm of governance and self-governance in this historical *Geist* we call the present, the trope of utopia is not incompatible with capitalism. In fact, capitalism is driven (or better put, inspired) by a certain utopian imagery and imaginary. The utopian urge of capitalism is imagined and enacted through ‘promises’ of effectivity, productivity, success, security, property, profit, flexibility, mobility, connectivity, creativity, (self-)knowledge, self-actualisation and (opportunities for) fulfilment and consumptive enjoyment. A constitutive component of this incitement to fantasise for an ideal future is, however, rational administration and ‘responsible’ (self-)regulation of desire and enjoyment.

The capitalist utopia that is implicit here (meaning the ‘free market’ utopia) is geared to the theological aura of consumerism as a nodal point of interpellation and subjectivation, which in turn is produced through socially sanctioned attachments and ‘appropriate’ desires. And so the late capitalist utopia as a *dispositif* of the manageable future repeats and sustains the desire for plenitude and surplus, and, at the same time, generates the regulated and distributed failure (or deferral) of promised satisfaction. The reproduction of the global capitalist present rests on this ambivalence of proximity and suspension, anticipation and discontent, catastrophe and salvation. And, further, it is this ambivalence that operates as a tropological

grid in which the normative temporality of the present biopolitical crisis comes to be firmly lodged within the most intimate folds of social intelligibility and affectivity.

This is about the 'spirit of capitalism' as famously described by Max Weber (1905/2009)<sup>2</sup> and denoted by devices such as the calculation of profit and double-entry bookkeeping. Weber's ideas on the spirit and magic of calculation offer significant resources for understanding the moral and discursive aspects of the recent global financial crisis (Appadurai 2011/12).<sup>3 4</sup> In a similar vein, Jean and John Comaroff (2000)<sup>5</sup> have interrogated the salvific, also even magical, qualities through which 'millennial capitalism' is invested with and configured by. What we might call the Geist (both as logic and as phantasm) of capitalism is twofold; namely, it performs as 'ascetic prohibition' (the bourgeois virtue of saving and self-control) and 'commanded enjoyment' (the consumerist incitement, or the duty to enjoy through spending and consuming) (Stavrakakis 2012).<sup>6</sup> The implication and mutual contamination between these two biotemporal paradigms (i.e. austerity and expenditure, disaster and well-being) provide a common sense for upholding apparatuses of self-management and calculable risk administration, in all its lived embeddedness in the ordinary.

The spirit of capitalist utopia is manifested, then, either as a lure for a future of upward mobility and security, compensating for the massive despair of post-Fordist austerity, or as a lived reality for the classes profiting from the normalised state of crisis. The current state of late capitalism – having become ordinary by the structures of neoliberal governmentality – puts into crisis the distinction between the enchanted spirit of 'organized capitalism' (Lash and Urry 1987)<sup>7</sup> and the neoliberal management of menacing crisis through deregulation and austerity measures. Euphoric market mastery and abundance, the purpose of which is to 'invest life through and through' (Foucault 1978, p. 139),<sup>8</sup> has never been sustainable for everyone, as much as current neoliberal austerity is injurious for most people but a profit opportunity for a few others – this is about the thanatopolitical limit of capitalist biopolitical rationality. The savvy irresistibility of the free market obscures local and translocal violences of abandonment, exclusion, alienation and disempowerment that inflect intersections of gender, sexuality, race and class.

Neoliberal governance of the free market entails the upward distribution of wealth and, thus, demands the dispossession of differently situated bodies, spaces, rights, common resources and livelihoods. For the consumer fantasies and free market profits to be enjoyed by some, others must be rendered cheap reserve labour – utterly exploitable, dispensable and disposable. The accumulation of wealth enabled by the expansion of the 'free market' not only necessarily implies and precipitates but obscures normalised cultures of social suffering and injustice. The present translocal predicament has revealed what was always the case in colonial/capitalist histories, as well as in their postcolonial and neocolonial corollaries. Rather than representing the 'benign' face of capitalism (purportedly opposed to the scorching moment of neoliberal excesses), grand narratives of prosperity, accumulation and entitlement are intertwined with structural forces of injustice, upward redistribution, war against labour, and the biopolitics of impoverishment, racialization and heteronormativity.

2. Weber, Max 1905/2009. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Stephen Kalberg. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

3. Appadurai, Arjun 2011. 'The Ghost in the Financial Machine', *Public Culture* 23, no. 3 (65): pp. 517–39.

4. Appadurai, Arjun 2012. 'The Spirit of Calculation', *Cambridge Anthropology* 30, no. 1 (Spring): pp. 3–17.

5. Comaroff, John and Jean Comaroff 2000, eds. *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, special issue, *Public Culture* 12, no. 2.

6. Stavrakakis, Yiannis 2012. 'Beyond the Spirits of Capitalism? Prohibition, Enjoyment, and Social Change', *Cardozo Law Review* 33, no. 6: pp. 289–306.

7. Lash, Scott and John Urry 1987. *The End of Organized Capitalism*. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.

8. Foucault, Michel 1978. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I, An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Pantheon Books, New York.

Michel Foucault addressed this complex amalgam of different yet consonant capitalist spirits in his lectures at the Collège de France in 1978–79: '[T]he liberalism we can describe as the art of government formed in the eighteenth century entails at its heart a productive/destructive relationship with freedom. Liberalism must produce freedom, but this very act entails the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats, etcetera' (2008, p. 63).<sup>9</sup> From this perspective Foucault understood neoliberalism as a 'new' regime of truth and mode of governmentality, which makes economic activity (especially in its forms of investment, interest and competition) an all-encompassing matrix of social and political relations (2008). As he summarised: 'Homo economicus is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself' (2008, p. 226).<sup>10</sup> Neoliberal governmentality, thus, renders economy as a dominant and pervasive rationality, subjecting all modes of the political, including processes of subjectivation, to this domination (Brown 2015).<sup>11</sup> By operating with desires and aspirations, along with coercion and (self-)control, neoliberalism 'makes live' by saturating the field of possibilities for living in the present and in the future.

9. Foucault, Michel 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France (1978–1979)*, edited by Arnold Davidson. Translated by Graham Burchell. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

10. Foucault, Michel 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France (1978–1979)*, edited by Arnold Davidson. Translated by Graham Burchell. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

11. Brown, Wendy 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Zone Books, New York.

## Troubling Authorised Ontologies of/in the Present, (Un/Re)learning the Poetics of Critical Agency

The ambiguous and polysemous figure of utopia – implicit and historically imbricated in colonialist, imperialist and nationalist projects – is often posited in essentialist terms, as a means of attaining and securing the ideals of a 'true', 'full', and 'well-ordered' society. However, something else is going on too in the present conditions of this possibility of utopia; other restless spectres are called up in the wake of temporal normativity that upholds the biopolitical present. The present milieu gives rise to critical utopian thinking as a performative way of reimagining and resisting (in) the present. The question of critical possibility is put to work despite and against the mainstream discourse of the neoliberal and neoconservative right, according to which any attempt to resist and change the present normalisation of injustice and inequality is utopian, and by 'utopian' they mean naive, impractical, impossible.

Drawing insights from postcolonial feminist and queer critique of universalist utopian assumptions, I would like to point to a conceptualisation of critical possibility, beyond the schematic dichotomies of affirmative versus negative and, ultimately, optimism versus pessimism. How can we reclaim imagining collective life otherwise amidst the normalising powers of a present that limits and unjustly allocates such possibilities? And how can we engage collective imaginaries and desires for political change, not in terms of an untethered, pure futurity but in terms of situated, agonistic relations with others? Such questions seek to explore ways of considering the aporetic as an inescapable site of critical agency.

These questions consider critical agency as always already an experience of the impossible; one that holds out on the transformative promise of self-questioning, unlearning and undoing the epistemic violences, institutional boundaries and divisions of labour that form the conditions of possibility for dominant knowledge

production. In this sense, a critical, utopian, situated (un)learning emerges as a contingent modality of political agonism, which might rearticulate and undo the established power/knowledge matrices regulating which (and how) bodies are made to appear, endure, matter, (make) sense and act as 'we'. This is about conceptualising political subjectivity as a critically dispossessed state of relatedness, rather than an unlimited positivity of human action premised upon the disavowal of contingency and vulnerability.

Critical agency is, thus, understood in terms of a collective agonistic desire to unfix and displace the orderly and ordinary terms of everyday despair, such as those related to neoliberal injustices in their intersections with racism and homophobia/transphobia. As recent anti-neoliberal and anti-fascist public gatherings and uprisings have shown, it is the common practice of assembling in public with others that actualises the living register of the political (Butler 2018).<sup>12</sup> Such an account of political agency as a radical re-emergence of the demos resists the drive to set up the desiring subject as situated prior to subjection through the matrices of the liberal, colonial, racial and phallogocentric (Brown 2015).<sup>13</sup> It also resists the propensity to conceptualise 'agency' as a capacity or quality that one might or might not 'have', akin to the model of 'possessive individualism'. This is what seems to be at stake in current critical practices emerging despite and against the embedded norms and forms of ongoing crises, in order to make justice thinkable and possible again.

'Most utopias forget that utopia is nowhere and make the empirically representational move', writes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999, p. 318).<sup>14</sup> Her critical perspective on the fantasies of immediate referentiality and unambiguous figuration has prepared us for rethinking utopia: defined not as an achieved or achievable hypostasis which 'takes place' under conditions of power-free timelessness, a prescribed enterprise of essentialist unity, but as a resistance to the normalising powers and foreclosures of the contingent present – the ghostly figure of critical performativity.

Drawing on these performative accounts of temporality, I would also like to point to the configurations of critical possibility that are not reducible to self-transparent subjectivity, moral universalism and temporally fixed actualisation, but which remain receptive to the restless sociality of dissonance and contingency, deferrals and 'disidentifications'. Some may contend that such a performative account of critical temporality lends itself to a melancholic framing. Why would one assume that melancholia is incompatible with critical agency, however? The question is rather under what conditions melancholia can be mobilised as a critical political concept and not be reduced to a mere sign of a self-absorbed, psychologised impasse. For those outside the purview of racial, class, gender and sexual propriety, melancholia is a socially constituted, affective site of subjectivation, and a performative modality through which to fashion world-making perspectives on everyday survival and resistance. As performance theorist José Muñoz wrote,

'melancholia, for blacks, queers, or any queers of color, is not a pathology but an integral part of everyday lives. [...] It is this melancholia that is part of our process of dealing with all the catastrophes that occur in the lives of people of color, lesbians, and gay men. ... it is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and

**12. Butler, Judith 2018.** *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

**13. Brown, Wendy 2015.** *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Zone Books, New York.

**14. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty 1999.** *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names – and in our names’ (1999, p. 74).<sup>15</sup>

The utopian is, thus, redefined here as a non-placed field of possibility in the face of its impossibility, occasioned by accumulated experiences of displacement, injustice and loss.

It is also from this perspective that we might read the performative nuances of the encounter between Ernst Bloch and Adorno on the question of utopia: the aporetic tension between the ‘principle of hope’ and negative dialectics. For Bloch, the rehabilitation of utopian hope remains an uneasy experience of the here and now, and involves a critique of homogeneous time: ‘Even a dash of pessimism would be preferable to the banal, automatic belief in progress as such’ (1995, p. 199).<sup>16</sup> Adorno’s notion of utopia, on the other hand, emerges from a combination of despair and hope: ‘Art’s utopia, the counterfactual yet-to-come, is draped in black’ (1984, p. 196).<sup>17</sup> Rereading their dialogue, Muñoz, in his book *Cruising Utopia* (2009),<sup>18</sup> developed a critical methodology for queer temporality. Cultural performances of queer futurity by those outside the racial and sexual mainstream can disrupt the normative social scripts of whiteness and heteropatriarchy and open possibilities for other ways of being in the world. In this respect, queer futurity is a mode of endurance and a critique which resists genealogical, reproductive ‘straight time’.

And so this reflection has addressed the agonistic (in)determinations of political temporality and accounted for some of the differential ways in which vulnerability, brokenness and dispossession allow transformative potentiality to remain uneasy, unsettled and aporetic. The utopian has been reconfigured here as a performative power which resists closure and finality, and underlining its proposal are the polyvalent implications of hanging in and moving on as well as being moved with and by others – *otherwise* rather than elsewhere.

**15. Muñoz, José Esteban 1999.** *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics.* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

**16. Bloch, Ernst 1995.** *The Principle of Hope, Vol. 1.* Translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

**17. Adorno, Theodor W. 1984.** *Aesthetic Theory.* Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.

**18. Muñoz, José Esteban 2009.** *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* New York University Press, New York.

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.

